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"DYING LIGHT IS NOW CONSIDERED A GENRE CLASSIC"



Many games have aspired to transport gamers into zombie apocalypse worlds, but few have ever truly delivered on the survival horror that such an event would lead to. The original *Dying Light*, though, bucked that trend superbly, delivering an immersive open world to explore, gripping narrative, as well as intense first-person action. *Dying*

Light is now considered a genre classic.

ROBERT JONES

Twitter

@rnicholasj

This month

Got hammered by a series of deadline disasters and had his 'Beast Mode' activated. Rob rampaged around PC Gamer Towers eating everyone's packets of Monster Munch.

So when Techland announced it was creating *Dying Light: The Beast*, a thematic sequel to that original masterpiece, we had to go get the inside scoop. Spoiler: it's looking awesome!

ROBERT JONES**PRINT EDITOR**

robert.jones@futurenet.com

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The PC Gamer team

**TYLER WILDE**

Bluesky

@tjcwilde.bsky

This month

Had another dream about *Borderlands 4*'s billions of guns. Woke up to a sticky bed. Oh not again, Tyler!

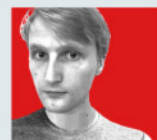
**IAN EVENDEN**

Bluesky

@ianev.bsky

This month

Joined the Aces crime fighting squad. Went to Edna Mode for his outfit. There were... no capes!

**JOSHUA WOLENS**

Bluesky

@joshuawolens.bsky

This month

Created his own death metal band called Kaos Knights. Their first gig is at the Snuggly Duckling.

**MORGAN PARK**

Bluesky

@morganpark.bsky

This month

Demanded he now be called Morgan Musashi. Was last seen reading *The Book of Five Rings*.

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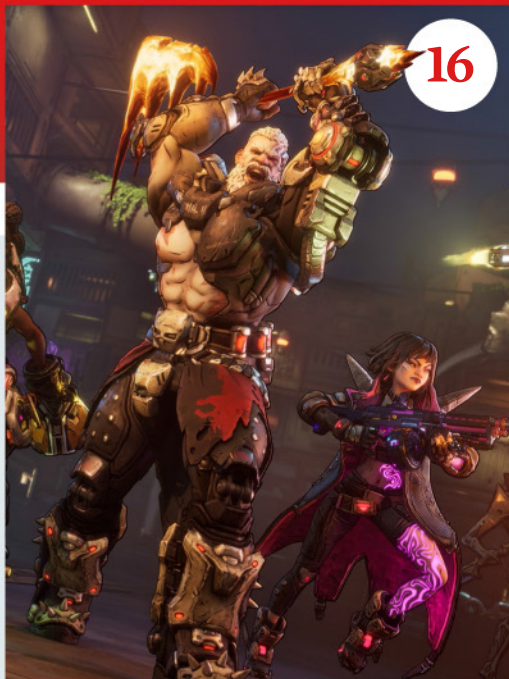
Tyler Wilde goes hands-on with Gearbox's brand-new *Borderlands* game and, thankfully, finds the series' gun-obsessed madness is still intact.

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Robert Zak travels to Wrocław, Poland, to go hands-on with Techland's new survival horror FPS.

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PC Gamer speaks exclusively to Warren Spector and Harvey Smith on the legendary immersive sim's 25th anniversary to discover how Ion Storm changed gaming forever.



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Does *Splitgate 2* make FPS games great again? Nova Smith locks, loads and dives through many a portal at terrifying speeds to find out. It's *Halos* with portals, guys.

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The PC Gamer hardware lab cooks up a stunningly compact, air-cooled, all white gaming PC.

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MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



How many question marks do you reckon are out there?

YOU BETTER BE-LEAF IT

THE WITCHER 4 is shiny, gorgeous, and... green?

As the opener to an annual tech event, it's pretty hard to beat showing off how *The Witcher 4* will look and run in actual gameplay, but that's exactly what Epic and CD Projekt Red did for the former's keynote speech at The State of Unreal 2025.

We all knew it was coming, of course, but sitting in a crowd of developers, creators, and journalists in Orlando, eardrums being blasted by surround-sound Ciri, it was clear that everyone wanted to be absolutely wowed by what *The*

Witcher 4's developers had in store for us. There was one standout technological improvement Epic will eventually be bringing out with Unreal Engine 5.7, and one thing that looks to be making *The Witcher 4*'s environment so dense, lush and detailed, and it's Nanite Foliage. The first iteration of Epic's Nanite tech (a

virtualised geometry engine) was for improving the surfaces of rocks, walls, and other large objects, and now it's all about leaves. Lots and lots of leaves.

What Epic and CDPR demonstrated with *The Witcher 4* showed that Nanite Foliage is going to be a much more popular system. That's because it uses voxels instead of rasterised triangles for handling leaves, pine needles, branches, etc when the camera moves away, to a point where you can't tell that what was a highly detailed tree is now just a haze of blobs.

The voxels still get lit as part of Lumen and all generate real-time

NANITE WAS ABOUT ROCKS. NOW IT'S ALL ABOUT LEAVES. LOTS AND LOTS OF LEAVES

IFORGOT

LAST-MINUTE FIX



Valve has had five years to make Steam run natively on Apple's new Apple Silicon Macs, and it never got around to it. That is, until Apple announced it would stop supporting non-Apple Silicon apps two macOS generations from now, prompting Valve to quickly release Mac-native Steam. ■ **JW**

BETRAYAL

FROM IS LYING TO US



If you've played *Elden Ring: Nightreign* and have had the misfortune of resurrecting a teammate who's at three bars, then you know just how tricky it can be. Despite what FromSoftware would have you believe, a YouTuber has proven that it's six times harder than it should be – the UI lies. ■ **EG**

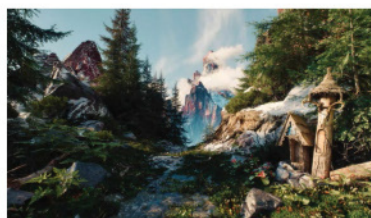


RADFORCE

BEST OF BOTH WORLDS



A lucky Redditor managed to snag themselves a graphics card plastered in both Nvidia GeForce and AMD Radeon branding. This production line mix-up is a rare creation, not seen since Intel and AMD teamed up for that weird Intel Core i7 8809G with Radeon RX Vega graphics. ■ **JR**



TOP: Ciri's back and more Unreal than ever.

ABOVE: Medieval despair never looked so good.

shadows, and the overall look is very convincing. At one point in the CDPR tech demo, the camera swoops down and rushes through a dense forest: at no point do you see any stuttering or lag or obvious LOD changes, just a seamless rush through countless trees.

THE SHADOW REMAINS CAST

Naturally, because it's all done using Nanite, the overall landscape, ground, and so on is just as fast and smooth. Letting the side down somewhat is the shadowing, as there are clear moments in the demo when shadows cast by trees and other objects popped into view as the camera hurtled about. That might all be improved in time, but it might also just be a limitation of the fact that a standard PS5 was being used to run the demo.

With the next chapter in the *Witcher* games aiming to be ray-traced and running at 60fps on that particular platform, it bodes well for what the PC version might be capable of. That said, we thought the same about *Cyberpunk 2077*, and look how that launch went.

Perhaps with CDPR choosing UE5 for *The Witcher 4*, the developers will be able to focus far more on content, assets, gameplay and optimisation, rather than just having to get the damn thing to work in the first place. ■

Nick Evanson

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Burnout paradise

After 15 months and 3,800 hours of 'worst case' usage, one independent test finds OLED burn-in is now almost a non-issue.

Short kings

Every FromSoft protagonist is 5ft 7in tall.

Full sales ahead

Sega accidentally leaked its own sales numbers – seven million people bought recent *Sonic* games.

Hytale it

Riot cancels *Hytale* and closes the studio making it.

Tanks, I think?

Russia says it won't arrest players after seizing the studio behind the Russian *World of Tanks* offshoot.

Code blue

Top firm finds that AIs will choose to merrily asphyxiate humans rather than be shut down. It's probably fine.

LOWS



The Spy

■ BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

The Spy is used to betrayal. For example, there was that one time when Randy Pitchford assured The Spy that *Duke*

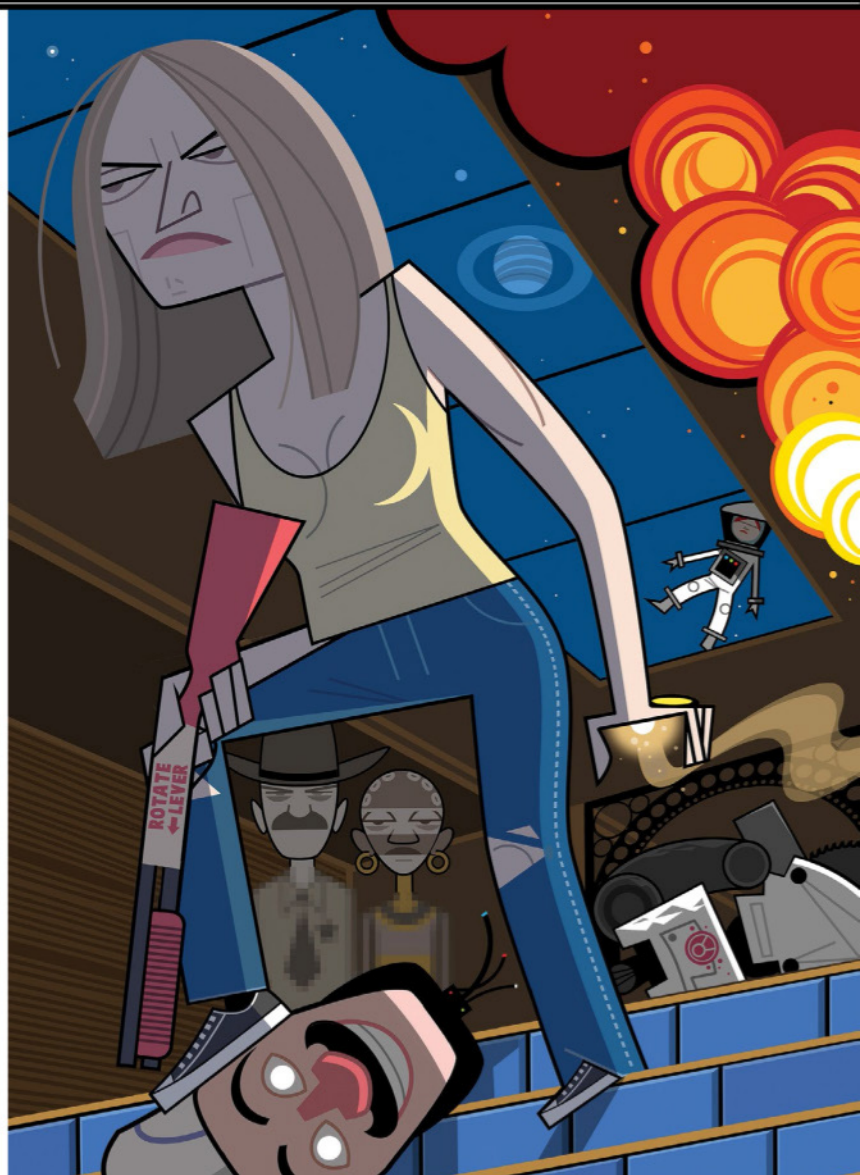
Nukem Forever was going to be the FPS of the decade. Betrayed! Or there was that time when Peter Molyneux told The Spy that *Fable* was going to let gamers plant an acorn in the ground and, over the course of the game, watch it grow into a tree. Betrayed! Oh, and of course, there are the countless times over the past two decades that The Spy has watched so-called insiders on social media platforms inform gamers that '*Half-Life 3* is confirmed!' and that it is 'launching imminently'. Betrayed!

While 'betrayal fives' are part and parcel of working at the pointy and shadowy end of the videogame industry, and something that The Spy has become ever more expert at avoiding, the rug pulls, flip-flops and outright deceptions, when they are revealed, always sting. So when The Spy got word in the rumour mill that industry bigwig Ken Levine, he of *BioShock* fame, was building a new game based on the concept of betrayal, The Spy set off to infiltrate Ken's studio, Ghost Story Games.

ET TU, JUDAS?

Sliding into Ghost Story Games' Massachusetts HQ undercover, dressed as Lobby the lobster roll mascot, and then plying security and devs alike with delicious chunks of fresh seafood, The Spy could effortlessly slip the net and gain access to Ken's 'Super Secret Studio Sanctum'. Within lay plans for the new game, which is entitled *Judas*, an FPS action game set on a starship stuck in deep space.

According to the documents, gamers will play as the titular Judas, who has committed a terrible act onboard the Mayflower space ship, which was reportedly transporting the remnants of humanity to Promixa Cantauri, and that action has caused the Mayflower to descend into chaos. Problem is, the now amnesiac Judas doesn't know what they did and, after re-awakening onboard the Mayflower must make deals and, yes, break deals via further betrayals, with the ship's three remaining controlling individuals to survive.



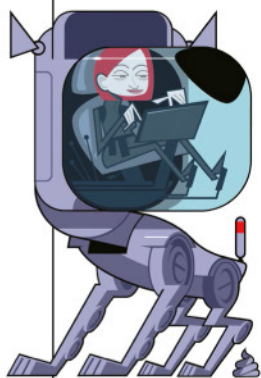
Naturally, these individuals all want different things, and Judas must navigate their way through the disintegrating ship while finding out what they've done, what's going on, and who should be trusted, all the while fighting off hostiles from the vessel's various factions.

The Spy was unsurprised to see that among the game's original working names was *SpaceShock* (hastily scribbled out with 'not again, Ken!' pencilled next to it), which feels apt considering that the game's protagonist has a computer embedded in her left hand that allows her to use a series of powers, much like *BioShock*'s plasmids. These range from attacks to hacking and stealth-oriented abilities, and can be swapped in and out by Judas as desired while navigating the ship.

As sweat from being in the Lobby costume too long started to drip down

The Spy's back, a swift exfiltration was then made, with The Spy pondering if the ultimate betrayal was yet to come. Can Ken deliver on these ambitious storytelling and gameplay goals after the hot mess of *BioShock Infinite*? The Spy is unsure. But one thing is for sure: Massachusetts lobster rolls are delicious and never go out of style. Spy out. ■

The Spy



THE SPY

The Spy wiles away sultry summer nights belly dancing with Guybrush Threepwood.

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SKYRIM'S NAPKIN AI

Bethesda's quest to make smarter NPCs started with a sketch from Todd Howard

Thanks to *Oblivion Remastered*, a whole new generation of RPG players has recently begun meeting Cyrodiil's oddest NPCs for the first time. For *Oblivion* vets, the full makeover released in April offers a chance to reconnect with some old pals, even if they do now look like they've had the mother of all facelifts. There was so much to love about Bethesda's gargantuan RPG back in 2006, but the vast array of eccentric characters wandering around and doing their own thing really set it apart from the previous *Elder Scrolls* games. Indeed, I think it fair to say that *Oblivion's* numerous nutjobs (I'm looking at you, Glarthir), wierdos, and total tools, as well as how they interact with each other, that makes it as memorable and impactful as it is.

This was down to Radiant AI, which Bethesda has continued to use in all of its RPGs since. And when it came to figuring out how to evolve the system for *Skyrim*, it all started with a sketch on a napkin. "The Radiant AI system was developed from a napkin drawing that Todd [Howard] gave us," says Bruce Nesmith, *Skyrim's* lead designer. Bethesda understandably doesn't want to give away too much about its secret sauce, but has granted Nesmith, who left the company in 2021, approval

to talk about Radiant AI's development. "So it's actually a napkin story. You don't hear many of those in real life, but this is a real one."

Howard started by drawing a hero in the centre of the napkin. "And then he drew various little icons to represent things like houses and monsters and whatnot around it and drew a line to them. And he said, 'The player interacts with these things, but they don't interact back with them. That was *Morrowind*. For *Oblivion*, we started having them interact with each other a little bit. But now for *Skyrim*, we want the world to point back to the player as well as interact with itself. So how can you do that?'"

Nesmith sat down with senior designer Kurt Kuhlmann and tried to figure out how to make this work. It was "very freeing," Nesmith recalls. "We went off on our own, and we came back with proposals. Probably some of the most creative moments I've had in the videogame industry, to be honest. And the idea was to be able to have events and objects in the world that the player interacts with and that the code is watching."

An early example they showed Howard connected NPCs, quests and players together. "You kill a person, and the game knows that NPC has relationships to other NPCs. That's data that we attach to the player. And this is all in the editor. You can see it all. And so



Radiant Oblivion

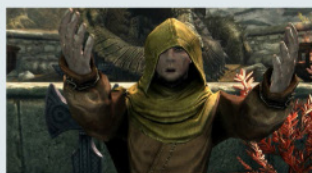
Oblivion's NPCs have their own AI quirks – they know they need to eat at a certain time, and if food isn't readily available they might suddenly drop into a crouch and try to pickpocket a snack from another character. That can lead to harsh words and even the guards stepping in. A quiet day at the pub can become a bloodbath.



FAR LEFT: Radiant AI had nothing to do in *Skyrim*'s famous scripted intro, but it came into play soon enough.

LEFT: This guy's worship routine may be overtuned.

SUPER VILLAINS *Here are the true villains of Skyrim*



HEIMSKR

We're trying to enjoy Whiterun and he won't stop preaching at full volume. I mean, shut up already!



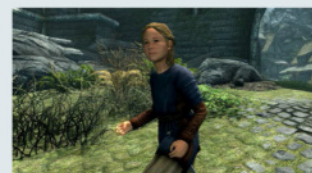
EVERY GUARD

Sweetroll jokes. Violence over minor infractions. The arrow to the knee line. Get some new material.



PHYSICS

I get that giants are strong, but one hit from its club shouldn't send you into orbit, should it?



THAT ONE KID

You know the one. The one who plays tag. Nothing delays a hero like being challenged to a game of tag.

it spins up a quest that picks one of the relatives who comes back and tries to kill you. So it created a quest to do that. And Todd really liked that idea."

But Howard wanted to see how this could be employed in a scenario that didn't involve killing. "It's at the heart of all these games," says Nesmith. "They were developed largely by men for the first 30 years. And our more violent tendencies come out in that." It was time for a change.

BLUE STREAK

So he went back and came up with a list of around 30 different actions that the programming could potentially monitor. "Things like, you pick up an item, you steal an item, you change a location, all these other actions that could be taken." This led to "large amounts of data" being attached to objects, which was new for Bethesda. "An NPC actor would know the location it belonged to; the location would know the actors that belonged to it. It would know the objects. And we had an event system where, when something happens, it goes through a list of potential quests that could get spun up, that all have conditions on them."

It could create interesting conflicts, as different NPCs each had a reason to try to get their hands on a specific object, and the system would draw the closest NPCs to the object, who the player could then encounter, beginning a quest.

"This felt very unique to us," says Nesmith. "The world sees the player. Think of how many games you

play where the world doesn't see the player. You kill that monster over there, and the rest of the world doesn't know. You solve this person's problem over here, and the rest of the world is not paying attention."

Nesmith is talking about more meaningful reactions here, not simply someone reacting to you killing a dragon by saying, "Oh, I heard you killed the dragon," though *Skyrim* does have that, too.

"You feel like you're actually part of something that's living and breathing, and like what you do makes a difference," he continues. "The world sees you. And I'm not going to sit here and say that Bethesda was the first game company to do that, because I don't know that for a fact, but we were one of the early ones. And we were definitely one of the biggest, that got the most notoriety and attention for it." Of the list of 30 possible actions that the programming could monitor, "virtually all of them" made it into *Skyrim*.

The wackiest version of Radiant AI, the version that's present in *Oblivion*, is the one that's always going to stick with me the most – it was weird and janky and hit me at a formative time. But that doesn't make *Skyrim*'s version any less impressive. Even now, well over a decade later, it's striking how it manages to craft a seemingly infinite number of bespoke quests and adventures every time you cluelessly wander into a dank cave or saunter through a new village. So thanks, Todd, for doodling on a napkin all those years ago. ■
Fraser Brown & Jeremy Peel

DIFFERENT NPCs EACH HAD A REASON TO TRY TO GET THEIR HANDS ON AN OBJECT



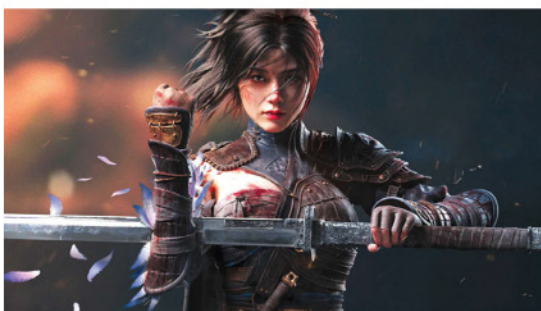
1 month



KILLING FLOOR 3

RELEASE July 24, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Tripwire Interactive

The co-op action-horror FPS series returns and tasks you and your squad with battling megacorp Horzine's inhuman army of monstrous zeds. Can you survive?



WUCHANG: FALLEN FEATHERS

RELEASE July 24, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Leenzee

Set in the land of Shu during the dark and tumultuous late Ming Dynasty, this stylish new Soulslike sees you fight as Wuchang, a skilled pirate warrior struck by amnesia.



MAFIA: THE OLD COUNTRY

RELEASE August 8, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Hangar 13

Prove your worth to the Cosa Nostra in the brutal underworld of 1900s Sicily. Violent third-person action adventure dripping with period detail and authenticity.

2 months



METAL GEAR SOLID DELTA: SNAKE EATER

RELEASE August 28, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Konami

Snake returns in, arguably, his most memorable mission to date. And this time he looks better than ever thanks to a UE5 glow-up. Tense espionage action awaits.



HELL IS US

RELEASE September 4, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Nacon

A stylish sci-fi third-person action adventure game set in a future dystopia where the world has descended into civil war and strife following a mysterious calamity.

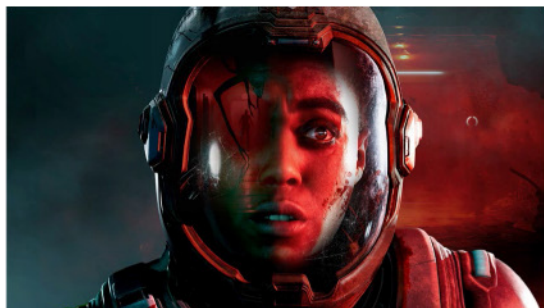


BORDERLANDS 4

RELEASE September 12, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Gearbox

The mayhem-fuelled looter-shooter returns with promises of billions of weapons, outrageous enemies and intense co-op action. Here's hoping it's better than the movie!

3 months



DIRECTIVE 8020

RELEASE October 2, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Supermassive Games

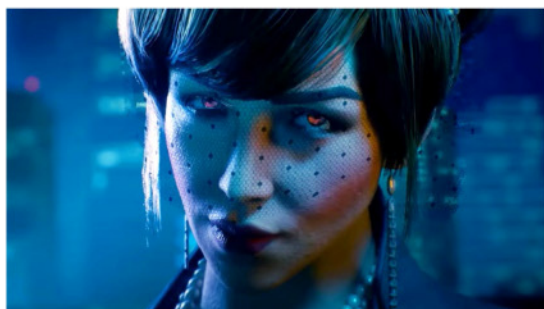
When a ship carrying humans crashes on an alien planet 12 light years from home, the crew must fight for their lives to survive. Survival action with a unique rewind mechanic.



KINGMAKERS

RELEASE October 8 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Redemption Road

If you ever wondered what it would be like to go back to medieval times and fight using modern weaponry then this is the game for you. Knight versus AK47, anyone?



VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES 2

RELEASE October 2025 | **DEVELOPER** The Chinese Room

Fight your way through a modern-day Seattle on the brink of an open war as an elder vampire. The long-awaited first-person World of Darkness RPG is almost here. Hype!

4 months+



JUDAS

RELEASE Unknown | **DEVELOPER** Ghost Story Games

The new narrative FPS from Ken Levine places you on a disintegrating starship. As the titular Judas, can you escape? And what deals will you make or break to do it?



CRIMSON DESERT

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Pearl Abyss

A gorgeous-looking open-world action adventure set in the same universe as MMO *Black Desert*. Adventure in the brutal continent of Pywel and forge your own destiny.



JUMP SHIP

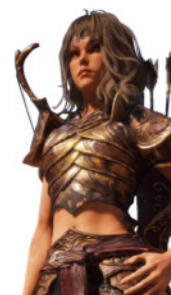
RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Keepsake Games

Mission based co-op PvE for up to four players where you explore and fight both in your ship and on the ground. Upgrade, maintain and repair your vessel with friends.

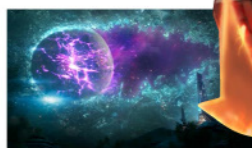
MOD

STRIKE A POSE

If you've been playing *Oblivion Remastered* and want to add more dynamic idle poses to male or female characters then nyx's Better Idle Pose mods are worth a download. Grab them both here: tinyurl.com/tj86fu62







NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

September 12, 2025

DEVELOPER

Gearbox Software

PUBLISHER

2K Games

LINK

borderlands.2k.com

BORDERLANDS 4

Gearbox goes bigger, but keeps doing what it does best

There are no big surprises here: *Borderlands 4* is more *Borderlands*. But if you're all extraction-shootered-out and a classic co-op campaign is what you're looking for (a sentiment I can sympathise with!), then I think you've got something to look forward to in *Borderlands 4*. Specifically, a bigger world, some fun new movement abilities, a cool hover bike, and possibly fewer memes. (Thank God.)

The bulk of my preview time was spent in *Borderlands 4*'s uncharacteristically colourful opening environment on the planet Kairos, which had been hidden from the universe until series protagonist Lilith teleported a moon into its orbit. That cosmic disaster disrupted the rule of an order-obsessed dictator called The Timekeeper, and the latest crew of vault hunters have now arrived on a planet in revolt.

FIRST CONTACT

I only saw a little bit of Kairos so I can't comment on the whole place, but I was surprised to find that I missed Pandora a little. I'm not a diehard *Borderlands* fan, but I had grown accustomed to its Old West desert vibe, and the greener Kairos isn't as evocative of roguish adventures.

It is ever so slightly more serious, too. After the excesses of *Borderlands 3*, which included a poop launcher called the Porta-Pooper 5000 and an extended Tommy Wiseau impression, Gearbox has promised to keep *Borderlands 4*'s sense of humour more grounded in the

Borderlands universe. From my brief experience meeting an NPC who stressed the importance of staying hydrated, it feels like they followed through.

In fact, I never thought I'd be saying this, but I wouldn't have minded if my time with *Borderlands 4* had been zanier, though I'm sure I'll think differently whenever Claptrap shows up.

They're nothing you haven't done in another game, but I liked using the new movement abilities – grappling, double jumping, and gliding – to quickly close the distance on hiding enemies and get above them. The butt stomp attack you can perform while airborne is fun to spam, too.

My favourite part of the demo, however, was the hoverbike. Unlike in previous *Borderlands* games, where you have to find a Catch-a-Ride station to 'digistruct' vehicles, *Borderlands 4* equips you with a bike you can materialise whenever and wherever you want, at least out in the overworld.

It makes this amazing noise, a sort of fan blade whine that tickles the brain. It can rotate on a dime and strafe, which makes aiming its front-mounted minigun relatively easy, but it's also fast and its momentum prevents it from changing direction instantly – thanks, Newton – so it takes finesse to round corners and thread gaps between trees. I only wished that when I ploughed into enemies the bike would send them flying, but I didn't manage any good punts. Maybe I just need to try harder.

PLAYED IT

GO BIG

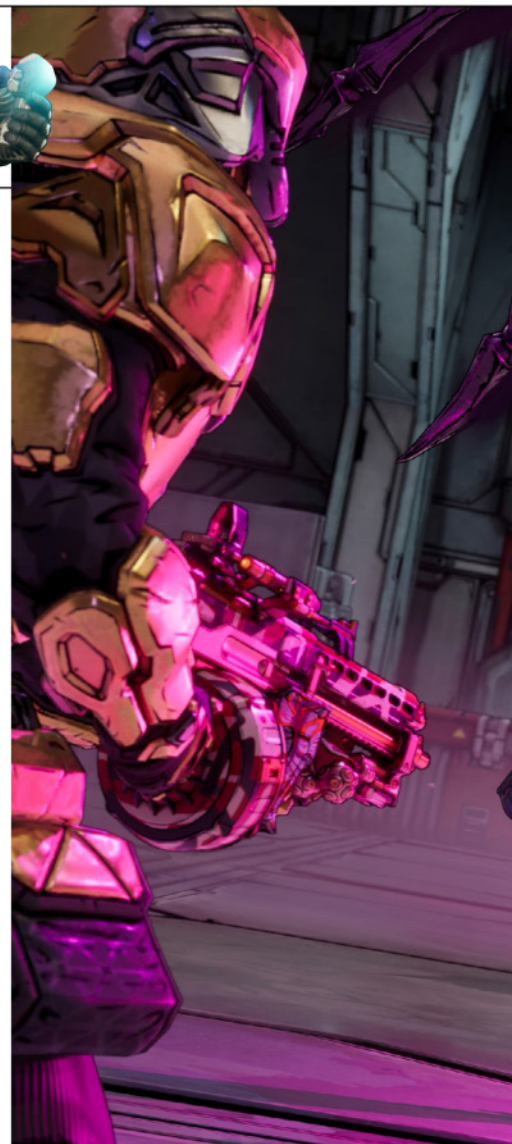
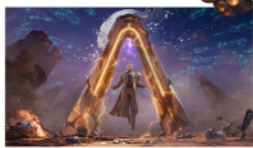
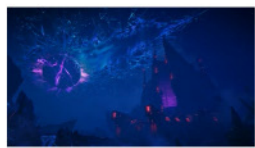
This *Borderlands* is the biggest *Borderlands* yet, Gearbox has said in a few ways. I had to stay in my preview playpen, so I didn't get to experience that bigness myself, but there was lots to find in the hilly grasslands I was constrained to.

Granted, *Borderlands* is mostly about finding guns and shooting people with them, so I mostly found guns and people to shoot, though to be fair there are also robots and alien beasts to shoot.

During one excursion, I swam through a partially submerged drainpipe into a secret base full of resistance fighters, where I found a cache of guns. I also shot my way into a little facility and pressed a button to release a tethered weather balloon thing, and although the premise

GEARBOX HAS PROMISED TO KEEP THE SENSE OF HUMOUR MORE GROUNDED

Borderlands 4



✖ escapes me, this somehow awarded me a vault key fragment that in the full game could be used to access one of the vaults of legend, challenging side activities.

You can also zip up the rope to the balloon high in the sky and then survey the landscape as you glide down. Why you can glide wasn't explained. It's just one of the new movement abilities. I landed on a pillar I wouldn't have otherwise been able to reach, which earned me, you guessed it: more guns. It had the pleasantly nostalgic feeling of something you'd do in an early 3D platformer.

THE ARMOURY

The procedural 'bazillion guns' loot system that defines *Borderlands* alongside its art style and sassy robot has seen some tweaks – nothing wild, but it all seems reasonable. Gearbox says that legendary guns will feel more legendary this time around, as they've lowered the drop rates, but that regular guns ought to be fun to use, too. Instead of using ammo, heavy weapons like rocket launchers now reload on a cooldown, so you don't have to save them just for bosses.

Since I only had a few hours to play *Borderlands 4*, I mostly stuck to the selection Gearbox kitted me out with, and I was impressed by the variety in my curated armoury. I used multiple sniper rifles with different firing mechanisms: a classic bolt-action rifle, one that fired two quick shots, one that charged up briefly and then fired a bunch of slow but powerful projectiles with a distinct pew pew sound.

My favourite gun was Amassing Buzzymuzz, an assault rifle with a secondary grenade launcher, huge ammo capacity, and a fire rate fast enough to make shots sound almost like a continuous tone.

INTO THE VAULT

My time with Buzzymuzz took place in the second half of my session, when I left behind the starting area and loaded a save with a level 20 character – Rafa, the Exo-Soldier, who's all about firepower – at the start of a Primordial Vault, a challenging side-dungeon with a boss.

The vault was a series of floating rock platforms under the glow of celestial gasses, each of which has to be cleared of waves of enemies on the way to a boss fight. Some of *Borderlands 4*'s baddies are, essentially, wizards: floating wardens with big hats who shoot sparkly magic at you. There are mechanical martial artists with glowing red faces that spin giant blades at you. There are badass dudes in golden armour. And as I backpedaled and fended off the swarms of these guys I was always at risk of blundering over the edge of the level or into a lava pit – good thing for the new double jump.

It was tough going it alone, but when my Buzzymuzz was buzzing I had a few satisfying gun ballet moments: Buzzymuzz a guy half to death, strafe behind a rock pillar to switch to the secondary grenade launcher and pop back out to launch a grenade at his face.

THE VAULT

I did not look quite so much like a gunkata master when I got to the Vault's boss, a giant metal scorpion ape who attacked with a pair of pointy, segmented tails. Jumping over his sweeping tail attacks wasn't too hard, but he also had a piercing attack and I misunderstood the related visual cue for an embarrassingly long time, dodging too early. It's not the most novel boss design stuff, but I'm glad he wasn't a pushover.

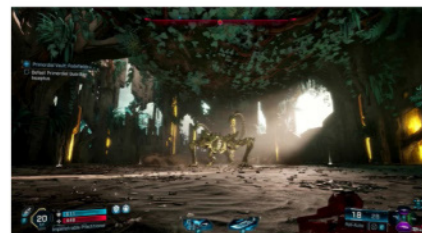
Back when there was more hair on my head, I reviewed the original *Borderlands*. I said at the time that it wasn't as charming as *Fallout 3* or *Half-Life 2*, and that the story didn't matter much, and that the quests were boring MMO-style 'go here and kill things' tasks, but that it was really about "finding weapons and shooting things with them" and that was good enough for me.

Almost 16 years later, a lot of people actually do care about the *Borderlands* story, and I appreciate more now that it at least has a signature style and attitude.

Otherwise, my feelings haven't changed, and there's something to respect in Gearbox's consistency. *Borderlands* has never been rebooted or turned into a roguelike extraction shooter with survival elements.

Gearbox is still making a four-player co-op game about wacky space rogues. The main thing you do is find weapons and shoot things with them, but now it's got a double jump. It was good enough for me in 2009 and it still is today.

Tyler Wilde



MY FAVOURITE GUN WAS BUZZYMUZZ, A RIFLE WITH A GRENADE LAUNCHER



LEFT: We're not on Pandora any more, but there's still plenty of Mad Max influence.

Fallen Aces



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
June 14

DEVELOPER
Trey Powell and Jason Bond

PUBLISHER
New Blood Interactive

LINK
s.team/a/1411910

FALLEN ACES

Immersive noir, with a hand-drawn look

The wiseguys came for me just after I woke up. I just had time to answer the phone – a warning that I was going to get whacked – and read a pamphlet on boxing left on the counter before they kicked in the door. Then I beat them with a bat.

That was the first time. It didn't end well. I left my apartment and got into the elevator, heading down to the lobby door like the guy on the phone said. But there were goons everywhere. Some didn't see me, so I could take 'em out quiet like, but others were hunting for me. I could hear them coming. So I crouched down, so they couldn't see me. Didn't work all the time though, sometimes I got in a rumble.

Just like the way I found a baseball bat in the closet of my apartment, there are weapons everywhere in this tower block if you know where to look. Like my old pal Dick Ray-Tracing says, "I knew one thing: as soon as anyone said you didn't need a gun, you'd better take one along that worked." But I didn't have a gun. I had a lead pipe, a board with a nail in it, a pipe wrench like I'm Adrian Shephard.

GOING UP

Into the elevator. It breaks. So I open the emergency vent and climb some ladders til I get to the machine room to flick a switch. But some gorillas followed me, looking for trouble. I get past 'em, and take out some more in the lobby before

picking up the key and heading out the door. In the city, the streets were dark with something more than night. It's raining. A car screeches round the corner and I'm gunned down, dead.

A BIGGER SLEEP

When in doubt, have two guys come through the door with guns. That's what they say. So I tried again. This time I kicked down the door to my own apartment before the two guys could do it, and there aren't photos of me boxing on my walls for nuttin'. I can block, kick, and perform different blows depending on how I'm moving. I punched them out then stomped on them to make sure.

And I start to notice things, like I'm a detective. There are a lot of vents, perfect for crawling through. There are status effects, represented by playing cards. Banana peels and gumballs, I'm told, are slippery, which will surely lead to hilarious traps for patrolling hoods. I only have three slots in my inventory, though things like pain pills are stackable, and there's no health bar, just my own smashed up face looking back at me from the bottom of the screen.

Fallen Aces, they call it, and that's me. Mike. I've got eight slugs in me. One's lead, the rest are bourbon. The drink packs a wallop and I pack a revolver. That's the sort of thing I might say, except I don't have the revolver right now. Fantastic world I live in though. It's all hand-drawn and hand-animated, looks like Ubisoft's *XIII* met *Grim Fandango*'s architect, more of an immersive sim than a boomer shooter, and there's swing music constantly playing from somewhere.

This time around, a guy punches me down in the lobby before I can even get out the door – I wasn't stealthy enough, and a goon I was trying to hit from behind noticed me. Adam Jensen never had this trouble, even though he actually didn't ask for it.

A couple of guys making a game like this? Priceless. Putting it in Early Access? Genius. Writing a whole game preview in first-person film noir idiom? Such a cliché. But that's what I went with, and I regret nothing.

Ian Evenden



The Tommy gun, a reliable friend in a bad situation.

IN THE CITY, THE STREETS WERE DARK WITH SOMETHING MORE THAN NIGHT



ABOVE: This ain't no dancing competition.

LEFT: The comic-book presentation drips with atmosphere.

Directive 8020



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Oct 2, 2025

DEVELOPER
Supermassive Games

PUBLISHER
Supermassive Games

LINK
s.team/a/2255370

DIRECTIVE 8020

This sci-fi horror with rewind mechanic still left me sweating

Supermassive Games has made a name for itself with narrative horror games such as *Until Dawn* and *The Quarry* that are driven by player choices but aspire to look like the movies. With *Directive 8020*, though, Supermassive is thinking about the breadth of its scares and is finding ways to iterate on how it does horror.

The story of *Directive 8020* is centred on a team of astronauts, undertaking a mission to Tau Ceti f, a last hope for a dying human race, 12 light years from home. The crew of the colony ship *Cassiopeia* depart with optimism, but soon find themselves embroiled in something much more dangerous than they could have imagined: a flowchart. OK, no, the flowchart – key to *Directive 8020*'s new approach to branching storylines – is actually helpful. The dangerous part is a strange, alien substance aboard the ship, something fungal and biological, that's able to change shape and even mimic members of the crew.

After playing a short narrative flashback setting up the journey, my hands-on demo with *Directive 8020* jumped forward to a scene where two crew members are trying to discern the source of the strange growths in the ship. It culminated in a horrifying showdown with their doppelgängers, which could morph into giant, hulking monstrosities.

McDonald tells me the team has researched a lot of horror, including the

Alien movies and *Dead Space*, to explore new strands of terror and different monsters; both through the impostor, and in space itself. McDonald pointed to the kind of fears only space can truly tap into. "The idea of being untethered, you know, in a space suit, drifting off into space... you can imagine what that's like, and how you would be reacting, seeing your co-worker as they float off."

Inside the ship, though, it's all about the shape-changing impostor alien. In one section I had to flee my own doppelgänger as it transformed into a giant monster and hunted me. These moments feel a little more third-person action-y than Supermassive games usually do. I managed to narrowly crouch-walk my way around my hunter, barely escaping thanks to careful timing and manoeuvring.

GOING WITH THE FLOW

While I got out, there was the chance that I wouldn't, and in that branching path there might be a stray impostor running around sowing chaos and gory death. In one of my last gameplay moments, I had to make a choice on whether to pull the trigger on a crewmate or believe in them long enough for a scan to finish. I didn't pull the trigger, but there are versions of the story and permutations where a player doesn't, and it shifts the story. This in itself is nothing new for Supermassive's stories, but with *Directive 8020* it's testing new ground: rewinding.

After making a major choice I was offered the brief chance to rewind and change my decision. In isolation this is a potentially novel mechanic, allowing someone to reverse a choice if they don't like the immediate results. Played out over the length of *Directive 8020*, though, it allows for much more fluid exploration.

McDonald showed me a flowchart of the game's story, with decision points and potential changes, snaking through the menus of *Directive 8020*. It's reminiscent of the *Zero Escape* games or *Detroit: Become Human*. With *Directive 8020*, Supermassive is letting players roll the tape back and see other outcomes, either immediately or to see everything the full story has to offer. "We encourage you to live with your choices, but if you want to change it, you can," he says.

Erik Van Allen

PLAYED
IT

A STRANGE, ALIEN SUBSTANCE ABOARD THE SHIP, SOMETHING FUNGAL AND BIOLOGICAL



Anyone could be a doppelgänger. Creepy!

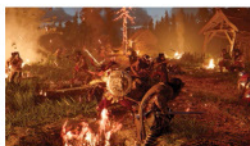




ABOVE: Make a decision and don't immediately like its outcome? You've got a brief moment when you can rewind time.

LEFT: Do you *really* want to go in there?





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2025DEVELOPER
Pearl AbyssPUBLISHER
Pearl AbyssLINK
crimsondesert.pearlabyss.com

CRIMSON DESERT

Open-world action that continues to look strong but unwieldy

I sat down to play *Crimson Desert* at my hands-on session armed with false confidence. I'd already played a combat demo at an event in 2024, so I charged protagonist Kliff into a battle with dozens of enemy soldiers with the foolhardy impression that remembering the button to swing my sword was good enough. I was instantly kerb-stomped.

Pearl Abyss has provided the press with lots of opportunities to play *Crimson Desert* ahead of its still-unspecified 2025 release, and in that time I've seen it described a number of ways: a game for fighting game sickos, a darker *Breath of the Wild*, *The Witcher 3* with a grab button.

All fair comparisons, but one thing my demo copilot insisted I shouldn't call it is an RPG. An "open-world action game" is the official messaging, which I took to mean *Crimson Desert* is as much an RPG as, say, modern *Zelda* games or *Far Cry*. There are quests, loot is present, but you're not designing a character from scratch, and the world is largely an action playground.

STRAIGHT COMBAT

My demo here was our first look at something other than straight combat in *Crimson Desert*. Our hero Kliff, a notorious mercenary, joins a brewing battle in the northwest region of the map. He does some walking, some talking, loads some cannons, and blows up some nearby watchtowers as target practice. It

was here that Pearl Abyss took the chance to point out *Crimson Desert*'s real-time destruction – the towers did crumble nicely, and apparently all destruction in the game is physics-based (not pre-baked animations) thanks to its custom engine.

After test-driving the awesome might of heavy artillery, the demo skipped forward in the quest to the middle of a gigantic battle. So began the aforementioned kerb-stomping: I was gutted, rammed, trampled and generally ganged up upon, but not even ceaseless bullying could stop me from trying to do cool stuff with *Crimson Desert*'s frenetic moveset. Kliff's fighting style is immediately fun because there you can do stuff like shoot magic at the ground to launch into the air, then chain that into a ground pound or slow-mo arrow barrage. Or you can infuse magic into Kliff's sword, unleashing *Ninja Gaiden*-like combos at ground level.

FLESHY BEYBLADE

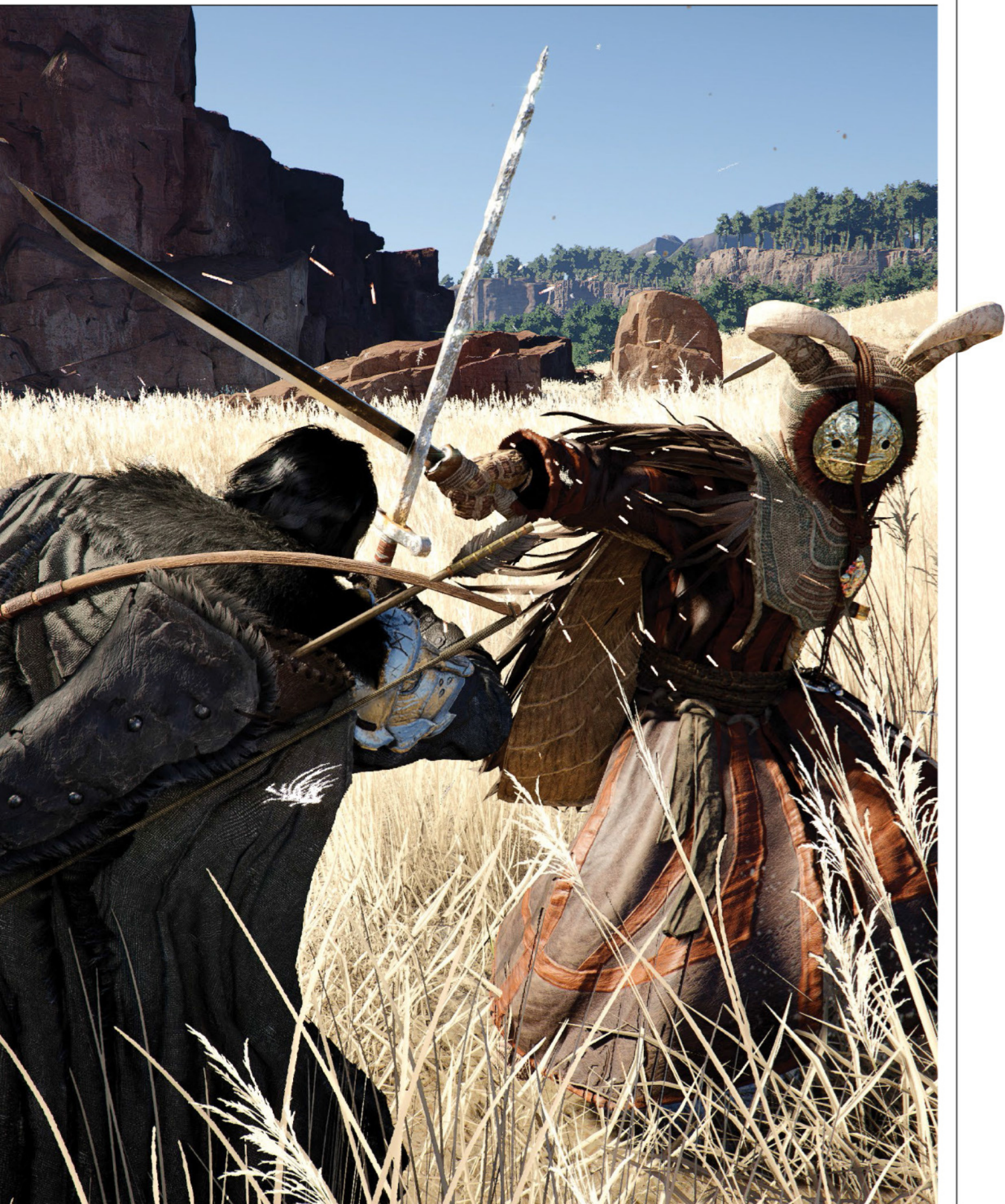
With my limited time, I chose to focus on grabs, the branching options of which really did feel like the complexity of a fighting game mapped onto a different genre. A stationary grab would slam enemies to the ground, but adding a directional input would toss them, turning them into a projectile. There was also a button combo for picking up guys and spinning them around like a fleshy beyblade, but I kept screwing it up.

I also kept screwing up my other favourite move (air launch, arrow arrow, ground pound), and I don't think it's entirely on me. *Crimson Desert*'s controls remain its true hurdle. All the coolest moves require pressing two to three buttons at once. Launching Kliff in the air? First I had jump, then I had to press L3 and R3 one at a time to mimic Kliff shooting magic out of his left and right hands. If I hadn't run out of magic juice just getting in the air, I could stay airborne just long enough to trigger slow-mo and maybe shoot an arrow.

Button combos aren't annoying on their own – Pearl Abyss is trying to cram a lot of verbs onto a gamepad, so it's no wonder the controls are hard to pick up when jumping into a random chunk of combat in the middle of the game. What

PLAYED
IT

I WAS GUTTED, RAMMED, TRAMPLED AND GENERALLY GANGED UP UPON



PREVIEW

Crimson Desert

RIGHT: Don't let the guys yelling on a stage distract from the big ogre on the left. What's his deal?

BELOW: Dragon riding is on the table in *Crimson Desert*.





☹️ got on my nerves is the noticeable lag between button presses and follow-through. My inputs always felt one step behind the action, like Kliff had to ponder my request to jump before doing it.

BUTTON COMBINATIONS

Maybe the setup had something to do with it (I was playing the PC version on a big TV with a controller), but I don't think latency is the culprit. More likely is that all those complex button combinations mean the game necessarily has to take a beat after inputs to make sure I want to jump with X and not, for example, charge toward a guy with X+A. I don't know if much can be done about that, but it certainly adds a layer of sluggishness to every fight.

One particularly excruciating moment of button tedium came in a boss fight in a throne room. The only way to damage the guy was to wear down his stamina meter to stun him. That gave me a short window walk up to a broken pillar, press one button to enter magic mode, then another two buttons to levitate the pillar, then rapidly mash another to actually lift it into my hands, then turn and smack him with it before he recovers.

In what is otherwise a combat system that seems to reward experimentation and improv, this forced solution almost felt designed to infuriate – like my own hell of quick-time events designed by David Cage.

I'm reluctant to complain that *Crimson Desert* made me fight its controls, because usually I like weird controls. I'm a defender of *Metal Gear Solid 2* and 3's absurd 'hold and release Square to shoot, lift off lightly to cancel' mechanic, even though not even Kojima gets that weird with controls any more, because it served the purpose of adding tension to every shot. Weird controls give games languages of their own – they add personality, ingrained muscle memory, and sometimes surprise us with how well they work after an adjustment period.

No such adjustment period has been possible with *Crimson Desert* in these short and disconnected preview bursts, but my impression is that its whirlwind

of bindings is a mix of sensibly weird (like the L3 and R3 to shoot magic out of each hand) and straight up bad.

I also hope Pearl Abyss does another pass on *Crimson Desert*'s grossly excessive particle effects. Any action imbued with magic – sword swipes, arrows, jumps, glides – peppers the screen with particles that camouflage the action in a green and white slurry.

GROUP COMBAT

In group combat, this made reading follow-up attacks needlessly difficult as I'd be punished for my own sick magic combos with a screen-wide flashbang. I accept that my brain could attune to the noise fine with some significant playtime, but I point it out because *Crimson Desert* already has that overwhelmingly detailed look to it that's become trendy among modern open world games. Its lush forests and fluttery foliage make for pretty benchmarks and screenshots, but in the same way that *Horizon: Forbidden West* pushed detail so hard that it often looked too busy in combat, I seriously question if *Crimson Desert*'s flashiness serves the meat of the game (hittin' stuff).

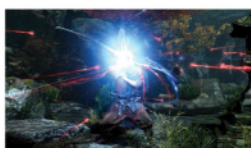
NITPICKING

While I'm nitpicking about a game that very well could end up a banger, the way Pearl Abyss continues to show off *Crimson Desert* also nags at me. We've only seen it in controlled, heavily guided sequences revolving around combat. I've been operating under the assumption that Pearl Abyss is holding back on other core activities – we know from trailers that there are cities, quests and puzzles somewhere out there – but after my SGF demo, I'm beginning to sense that Pearl Abyss isn't focusing on that other stuff because they're not particularly important. *Crimson Desert* is an "open-world action game" after all, not an RPG. Maybe that means I should lower my expectations around story, dialogue, quests, and good narrative stuff like that, and instead go into *Crimson Desert* more like *Elden Ring*: a big combat playground, and not much more.

I hope I'm wrong about that one, because *Elden Ring*'s exclusive focus on combat was one reason I never finished it. That said, I'm feeling way better about *Crimson Desert*'s gritty, physics-based brawls, if only because it's so different from the wave of FromSoft clones we've been riding for half a decade now.

Morgan Park

WE KNOW FROM TRAILERS THAT THERE ARE CITIES, QUESTS AND PUZZLES

Onimusha: Way of the Sword

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2026

DEVELOPER
Capcom

PUBLISHER
Capcom

LINK
s.team/a/2638890

ONIMUSHA: WAY OF THE SWORD

Kinetic combat unlike I've ever seen before

The most disappointing thing about my demonstration of *Onimusha: Way of the Sword* is that I didn't play it: Capcom shuffled press into a room to watch a theatre demo of *Onimusha*. However, *Onimusha* was played live, and that point was the difference maker in my hype levels for this Samurai slasher.

Without the game being played live, I would have been nowhere near as impressed with the perfectly coordinated fights I witnessed, with a Capcom dev showcasing the swordplay of Miyamoto Musashi, *Way of the Sword*'s protagonist, whose face was modelled after legendary Japanese cinema icon Toshiro Mifune.

Musashi's animations stood out immediately. His swings were measured, playing out much slower than most katana-wielding game heroes while blending smoothly from one slice to the next. His movements were dancelike, emphasising technique while letting every individual attack breathe.

Despite some obvious modernisations inspired by FromSoftware games – I noticed the series' signature villains, the Genma, now have *Sekiro* stamina meters – *Way of the Sword*'s group combat, wide camera angle and omnidirectional block reminded me more of *Ghost of Tsushima* than anything FromSoftware makes. The two games seem to have a similar balance of manual input for basic attacks and canned animations for things like executions or grapples.

FIRST
LOOK

SWORD MASTER

And the sword clashes – holy hell. When the Capcom presenter said the word 'parry' I expected to see Musashi deflect the other sword in one big 'bounce' like countless other games, but even here, *Onimusha* takes its time. Swords collide, spewing a fountain of sparks in every direction as the pair of blades drag left and right, redirecting the enemy's strength and knocking them off balance. Capcom said players can use these protracted clashes to 'steer' where their opponent stumbles. The demo driver demonstrated this by parrying a Genma and shoving it into a pile of flammable debris.

You can see some of that parrying action in the latest *Onimusha* trailer, particularly when the ogre boss appears. Watching the towering brute slam its big mace down on Musashi's sword as he fends it off looked like it felt amazing.

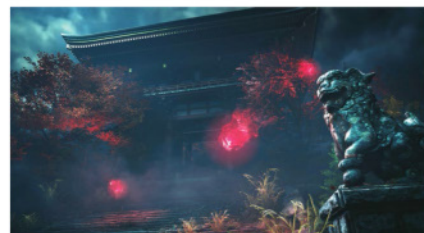
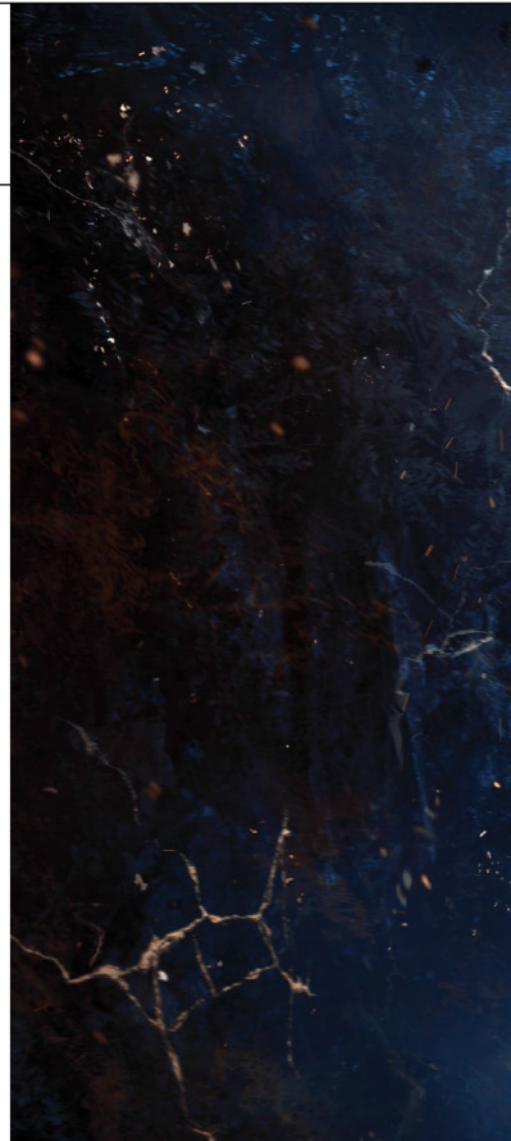
Capcom also made a big show of the Oni gauntlet, a tool that gives Musashi magic powers and lets him vacuum up Souls (an upgrade currency dating back to classic *Onimusha*, as I understand it). The Genma spew out Souls like purple-blooded piñatas, but you have to collect them mid-combat before they disappear. At least one enemy type, a floating globule beast, will even suck up Souls if you're not fast enough and then explode in Musashi's face.

The demo concluded with an boss fight with one of Musashi's rivals, Sasaki Ganryu, another samurai who has found an Oni gauntlet. The 1v1 fight was the perfect coda after all the fodder slaughter: the camera pushed in closer, emphasising Ganryu's gnarled smile as Musashi deflected a combo. The Capcom demo player made quick work of him, but noted it would not be the last run-in with the rival samurai. In fact, that trailer seems to suggest there are more of samurai walking around with Oni gauntlets.

It was a demo so clean that I struggled to come up with a single worry. Maybe classic *Onimusha* fans will have some quibbles, but at a time when there's a new Soulslike every week and even *Ninja Gaiden* is making a comeback, *Onimusha: Way of the Sword* is the action game I'm paying special attention to. It's coming sometime in 2026.

Morgan Park

SWORDS COLLIDE, SPEWING A FOUNTAIN OF SPARKS IN EVERY DIRECTION



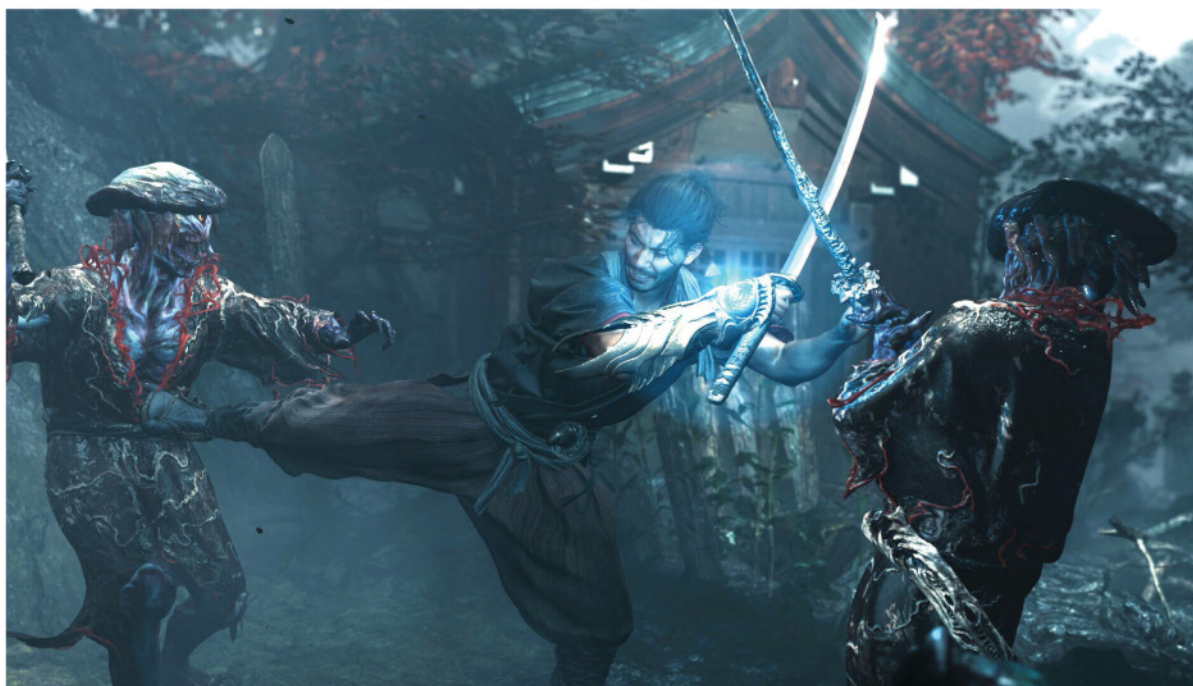
Musashi's Oni gauntlet lets him vacuum up souls.

Onimusha: Way of the Sword



ABOVE: Legendary swordsman, Miyamoto Musashi, is modelled on Japanese cinema icon Toshire Mifune.

LEFT: The sword clashes are unlike anything we've seen to date. Sparks fly!



PREVIEW

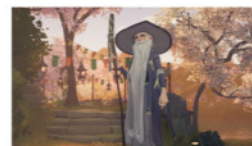
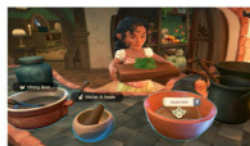
Tales of the Shire



ABOVE: Another idyllic day in the Shire. Time for second breakfast, methinks.

RIGHT: Is it really a cosy life sim unless there is fishing?





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
July 29, 2025

DEVELOPER
Wētā Workshop

PUBLISHER
Private Division

LINK
tinyurl.com/a32nwwk2

TALES OF THE SHIRE

Minimalism is out, cottagecore is in

After a few minutes of opening cutscenes and questing during my time playing a demo of *Tales of the Shire* I asked Wētā Workshop if I could spend the rest of my *Tales of the Shire* demo time just... moving furniture around back at my hobbit hole. Thankfully I was met with enthusiastic approval. Apparently rearranging all day is a perfectly acceptable way to approach life in Bywater.

And that's how I spent a majority of it – obsessively picking up everything from one room and bringing it into another to make piles of decorative clutter. My closest in-universe relative is probably Smaug, though instead of gold, I'm sitting on a pile of colourful bottles, fraying pillows, and charity shop trinkets. *Tales of the Shire* is quite laid back; it's more akin to *Animal Crossing* than anything else, at least the way I played it. My biggest concern was, "Can I make it cluttered and cute?" And the answer was always yes.

My demo began the same way players will start *Tales of the Shire* next month, by meeting Gandalf and being thrown into a few quests around Bywater. Truthfully, I didn't have enough time to develop a strong impression, but I'm not so sure I dig the character designs or personalities. It's part of why I was so easily derailed from the main quest, and with my time being so limited, I opted to go all-in on cooking and decorating. Since hobbits measure their days by when they'll eat next, I assumed *Tales of the Shire* would nail that recipe.

For now, I'm going to have to hold off on awarding any Michelin stars. The actual process of boil 'em, mash 'em, stick 'em in a stew was... fine. I liked rummaging around and foraging for ingredients and figure that will only improve the more I'm able to explore, but I can't see the actual cooking mechanics growing on me. The prep work didn't feel as satisfying as the end product looked. Setting the table, surprisingly, was way more fun. You get to move dishes around and get creative with how to present the spread. It's a chore I absolutely hate at Thanksgiving but loved in my miniature Tolkien home.

MESS MODE ACTIVATED

That's when I leaned into the I'm-going-to-make-a-mess approach. It only took a few minutes of playing around to realise decorating my hobbit home was surprisingly free. There were hardly any restrictions on dragging things from inside to the outside or vice versa, so I took a bunch of cups outdoors to cosy up my garden as makeshift vases. It was also quite easy to move around garden beds and accessories, with no penalties for setting something down and picking it right back up.

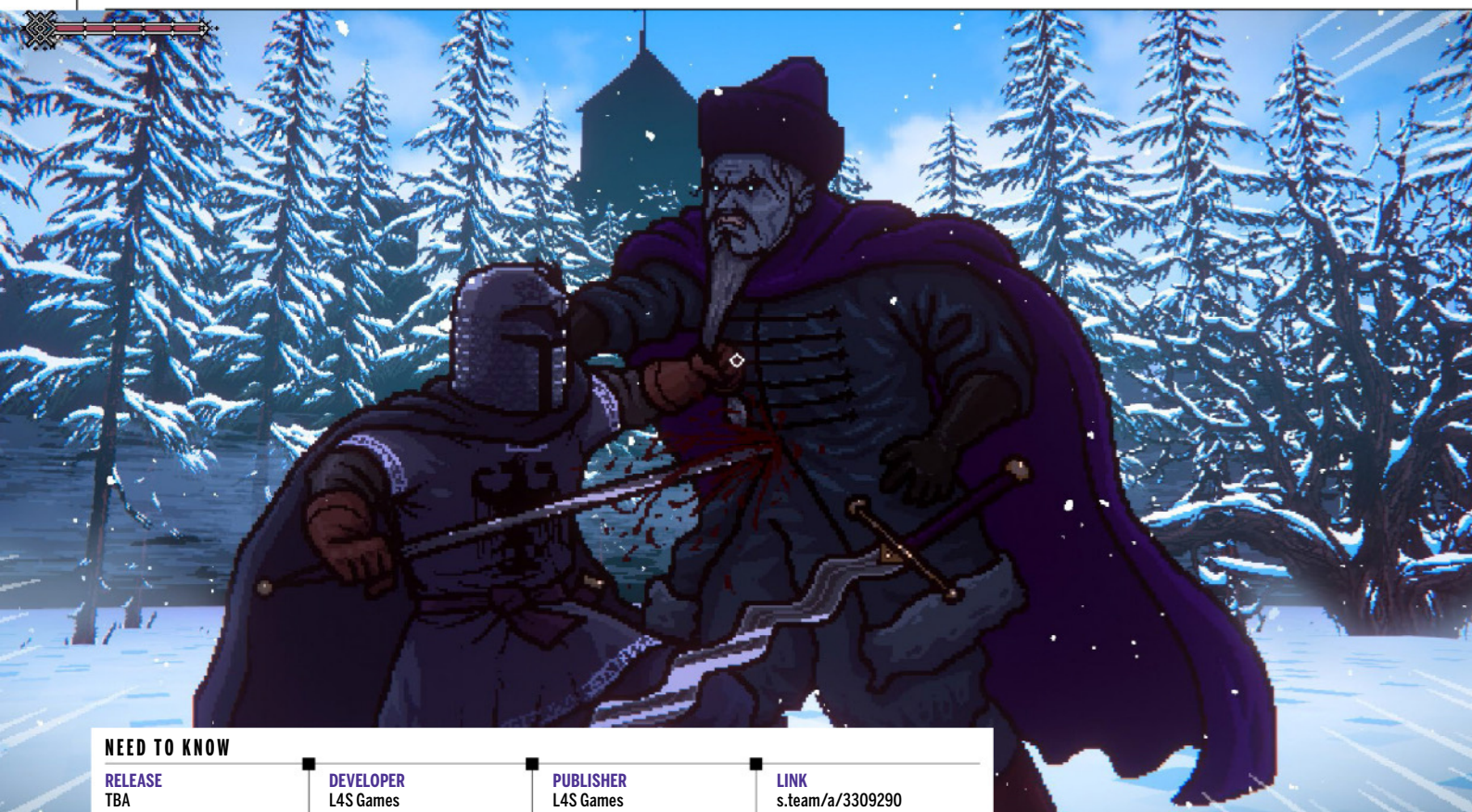
By the time I was done with my demo I'd uprooted the whole damn garden and confined everything to a corner. It left the rest of the yard pathetically barren, but with more time, I would've done whatever quest or chore the other hobbits requested of me to get more furniture and plants. My inevitable jungle of a yard would violate a novel's worth of local rules anywhere else, but I'm delighted the hobbits let me get away with it.

This really is the life sim for disgusting maximalists. Much like the number I did on the garden, I spent the remainder of my time piling household items together in the dining room. To my disappointment there were a few non-decorable surfaces like the dining table, but since you'll regularly place tasty spreads there, I get it. Instead I focused on stacking pillows, bowls, books, and potatoes in a cupboard. I understand the combination makes no sense, but that's where *Tales of the Shire* and I are in sync.

Andrea Shearon

THE ACTUAL PROCESS OF
BOIL 'EM, MASH 'EM, STICK
'EM IN A STEW WAS... FINE





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBADEVELOPER
L4S GamesPUBLISHER
L4S GamesLINK
s.team/a/3309290

BLACK RAVEN

This slasher looks like a comic that inspired death metal bands

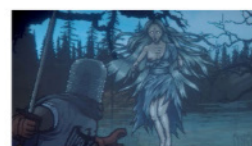
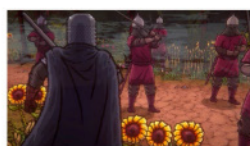
A sufficiently striking coat of paint can get me interested in a game before I know anything else about it. So it was with the demo for *Black Raven*, a “2.5D action-adventure rooted in Slavic Folklore”, whose screenshots are such a vibe that I downloaded it sight-unseen.

PLAYED IT



Which, gosh, might have been a mistake, because some very unpleasant things happen to you in the first 45 seconds or so of *Black Raven*. Have you seen *Gladiator*? It's like *Gladiator*. Your fella, Ivan – a man made entirely of jaw – runs off into the woods thinking he's spied a friend, only to return to find his home burnt, wife murdered, and child... abducted? Probably abducted, since I don't think we see them again.

It feels a tad gratuitous – scenes of intense violence to compensate for the fact that you likely haven't developed much of a bond with Ivan's family in the



15 seconds you get with them – but I get what it's going for. This is dark, pulpy comic-book fare, regardless of all the references to Slavic mythology. The aim is to get you to the bit where Ivan gets sad and kills everyone. Bold hues in visuals and narrative, I guess.

The setting for Ivan's romp is a 14th-century fictionalised Ukraine, which is currently suffering in the middle of the Black Death plague, and sees our vengeance-filled protagonist venture forth across Eastern European sweeping plains, desolate villages, haunted battlegrounds, and eerie woodlands. The game's developer describes *Black Raven* as a melting pot of Ukrainian, Polish, Russian and Belarusian culture and history.

A MELTING POT OF UKRAINIAN, POLISH, RUSSIAN AND BELARUSIAN CULTURE

SHORT BUT SAVAGE

Black Raven's gothic pixel art presentation really does look great, though: every step and slash looks like a panel from a 1980s comic strip that only seven people read but then informed loads of death metal band album covers. *Black Raven's* demo is comically short – it took me ten minutes with one death, and consists of a short story segment and a short combat segment to follow it, but it leaves an impression. The 2.5D lends everything a distinctive otherworldly quality that sticks with you even if there's not much else to sink your teeth into.

This is one to keep your eye on, I think. Admittedly, the vast majority of my interest comes from the art style alone – the brief slice of combat you get is very simplistic – but I think this thing has potential, and it'd seem daft to comprehensively judge a thing based on a demo I could play over six times in a single lunch break. I'm into what *Black Raven* is going for. The full release, whenever that is, might not go for it successfully, but I'm willing to give it the chance.

Joshua Wolens

NEW CARDS
UNLOCKEDMovement and
actions share the
same resource.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBADEVELOPER
The Outer ZonePUBLISHER
11 bit studiosLINK
s.team/a/2825880

DEATH HOWL

A Soulslike deckbuilder that's
coming together superbly well

When I heard the words 'Soulslike deckbuilder' I thought nah, surely not, but after going hands-on with *Death Howl* I'm happy to report that, yeah, surely yes. *Death Howl* doesn't just work, it's extraordinarily clever in the way it captures a Soulslike loop within the frame of a deckbuilder.

PLAYED
IT

Here's the setup: you, a shaman named Ro, are plunged into a deadly spirit world in a quest to pull your late son back from the jaws of death. You start out flinging pebbles and bits of bark, but as soon as you've cleared the first area, deadly synergies start to unfurl themselves.

Half of this power boost comes from knowledge. *Death Howl* has block cards, but your best defence is to not get hit at all. Movement and cards both use the same resource, making each turn into a question of whether to burn through your mana on offence or keep your distance. It's fighting game footsies rendered into

turn-based strategy, and it works great. The ideal result of every turn is to force monsters to overextend to just within striking range – each of them has a movement that it can go a little bit beyond, but if it does, it doesn't get to attack. It's extremely similar to the routine of dodging, waiting for an opening, and then attacking in a FromSoftware game.

MAX SYNERGY

Each enemy also has a 'danger zone' you don't want to end your turn inside, noted by an exclamation mark above their head: boars can charge and birds can fire attacks at you in a straight line. Snails are slow-moving, but will tear you to shreds if you get close, and so on. Ending your turn in the wrong spot is a great way to get

vivisected. Other Soulslike elements are translated, too. There are your bonfire-style checkpoints, and if you die, you respawn next to the combat you flubbed with your Death Howls, a resource you use to make cards or obtain skill points.

But to me, what makes *Death Howl* immediately enthralling isn't how it copies FromSoftware elements: it's in how it approaches the deckbuilder side of things. Rather than trying to cobble together synergies, you're slowly gaining cards like pieces of gear, then piecing together combos. For me, this involved combining a sharpening stone card, which increased the damage of my attacks, along with double and triple-strike cards.

Going from desperately pelting boars with rocks to deftly sharpening my spear, dancing towards them, and then carving my name into their pelt with a flurry of blows? It's deeply satisfying, and it made me want to keep exploring for more tricks to put under my belt. Rather than fight with each other, the two distinct halves of *Death Howl*'s elevator pitch are coming together to form a compelling whole.

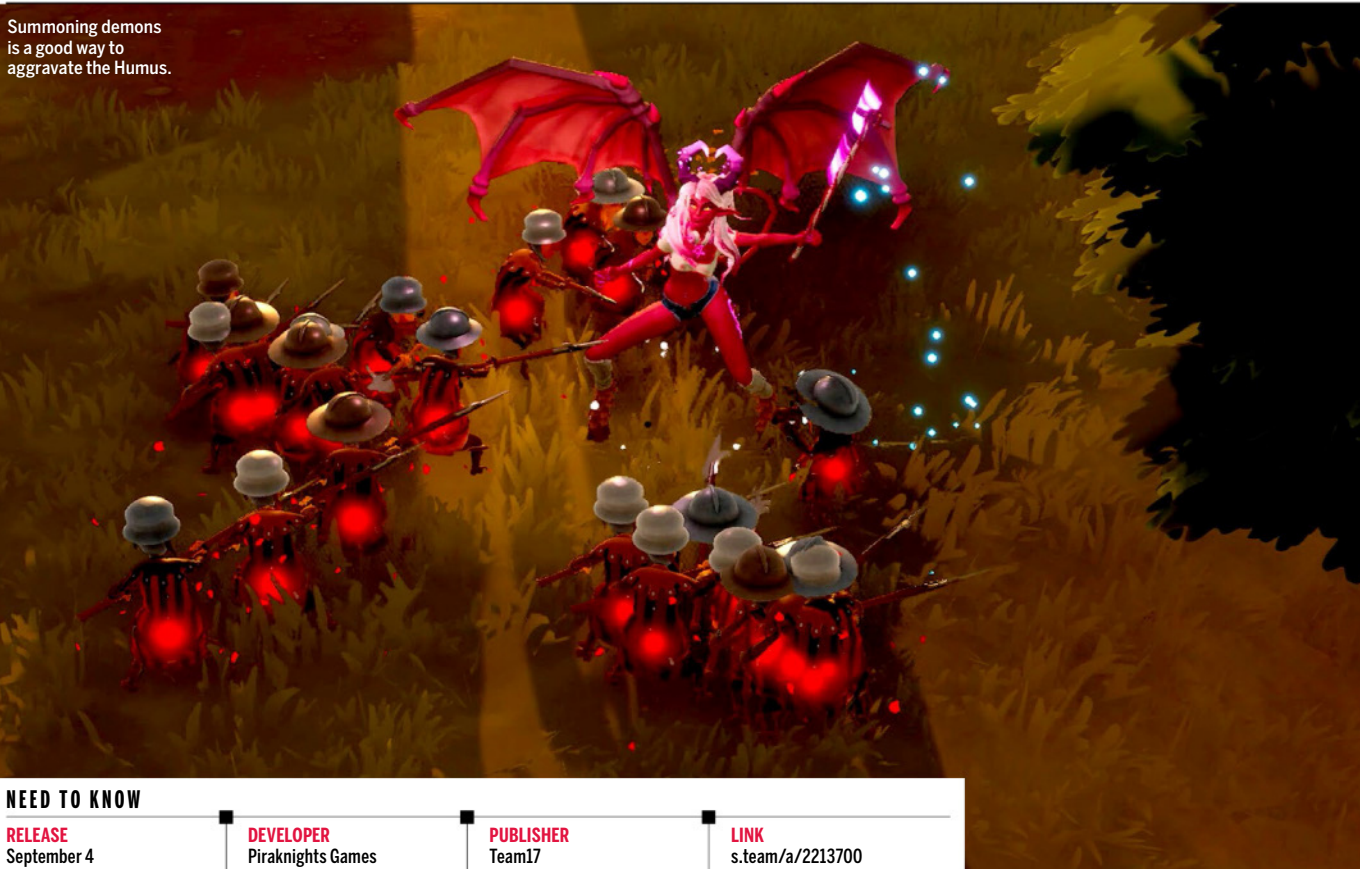
Harvey Randall

**ENDING YOUR TURN IN
THE WRONG SPOT IS
A GREAT WAY TO
GET VIVISECTED**

PREVIEW ROUNDUP

By Ian Evenden

Summoning demons is a good way to aggravate the Humus.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
September 4

DEVELOPER
Piraknights Games

PUBLISHER
Team17

LINK
s.team/a/2213700

SINTOPIA

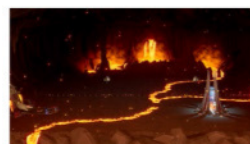
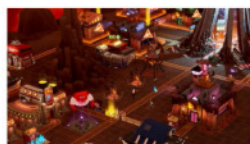
Hell is other people, but now you're in charge

For an art form largely based on turning killing into pleasure, videogames have always been oddly comfortable with the concept of Hell. The infernal regions in *Sintopia* are merely a stopover in a cycle of reincarnation, and they're fully privatised too, run by a detached and uninterested management team.

PLAYED IT

That's where you come in. As Hell's new administrator, appointed despite having no relevant experience or even a fully filled-in CV, you're expected to keep on top of the Humus as they live, accumulate sins, die and are taken to Hell in a bus in order to endure punishment to have those sins removed before they're sent back up to the overworld to have another go at it all.

This is achieved via a *Two Point*-like building and management game, with hints of *Populous* in the way you can skim around the overworld casting spells on Humus to push them into



doing what you want. This usually means sins. Get them down into your punishment machine, and you get paid for all the sins you burn away, so a highly sinful population above means more cash below for you to spend on building horrible things.

These horrible things include a building in which imps subject Humus souls to a puppet show in order to cleanse them of their sins, and another in which they're forced to watch a movie about how evil and sinning is bad, in the style of *A Clockwork Orange*. It's all extremely *Two Point*.

HELL TO PAY

The problem with running Hell as a profit-making business is that you need

a constant flow of souls, and they need to have sinned. It's no good if they live in a utopia in which they live actual good lives, you need to inject a bit of fun into proceedings. You'll also need to do a bit of killing, to speed up the flow of souls to the underworld in order for them to become useful economic units.

FORCE PUSH

The first spell that you are equipped with is called Force Push, and it just shoves things around. I found that using it to set houses on fire, then pushing Humus into the conflagration, was an effective way of ending their lives, but when I found the cows it went to a whole new level.

Your adviser Lili, a tamed succubus with a voice like treacle, mentions crushing them under udders, but it's not until you try it that you discover that flinging cows into the air sprays milk everywhere, and they kill everything they land on, so you can flick them up and into the fields, taking out all the workers in a serial-killing milkshake. It's a hellish good time.

**YOUR ADVISER IS LILI,
A TAMED SUCCUBUS
WITH A VOICE
LIKE TREACLE**



PREVIEW ROUNDUP

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Q3 2025

DEVELOPER
JG Games

PUBLISHER
JG Games

LINK
s.team/a/1830290

FALL OF AN EMPIRE

Skip to the end, that's where the fun is

Do game devs ever stop thinking about the Roman Empire? Probably not, considering the number of their creations that use it as a setting. *Fall of an Empire* tries to do something different from the classic 4X structure that sees you conquer the world from a village. It runs it in reverse.

Well, sort of. The idea here is that you start with a fully fledged empire, and having taken power in a military coup, you manage (or even halt) its decline. With 12 provinces, almost 150 settlements and four million citizens living under your benevolent rule, the job of emperor is not an easy one, and barbarians, Huns and other raiders start to nibble around the edges.

TOP OF THE HEAP

You're not the only one at the top of the heap – each provincial governor beneath you has their own goals and needs, and need to be carefully managed to keep the balance of power in your favour – playing them off against one another if needs be. Then there are further layers: senators, generals, even

spies, who need to be considered if you're going to defy history.

ROME SWEET ROME

Eventually, things are going to come down to a fight. If you want to hold onto your empire, you might want to use diplomacy and intrigue as much as possible. When combat is inevitable, the battle system owes a lot to *Total War*, with real-time tactics coming into play as well as a strategic view that allows you to place your units to make the best of their abilities.

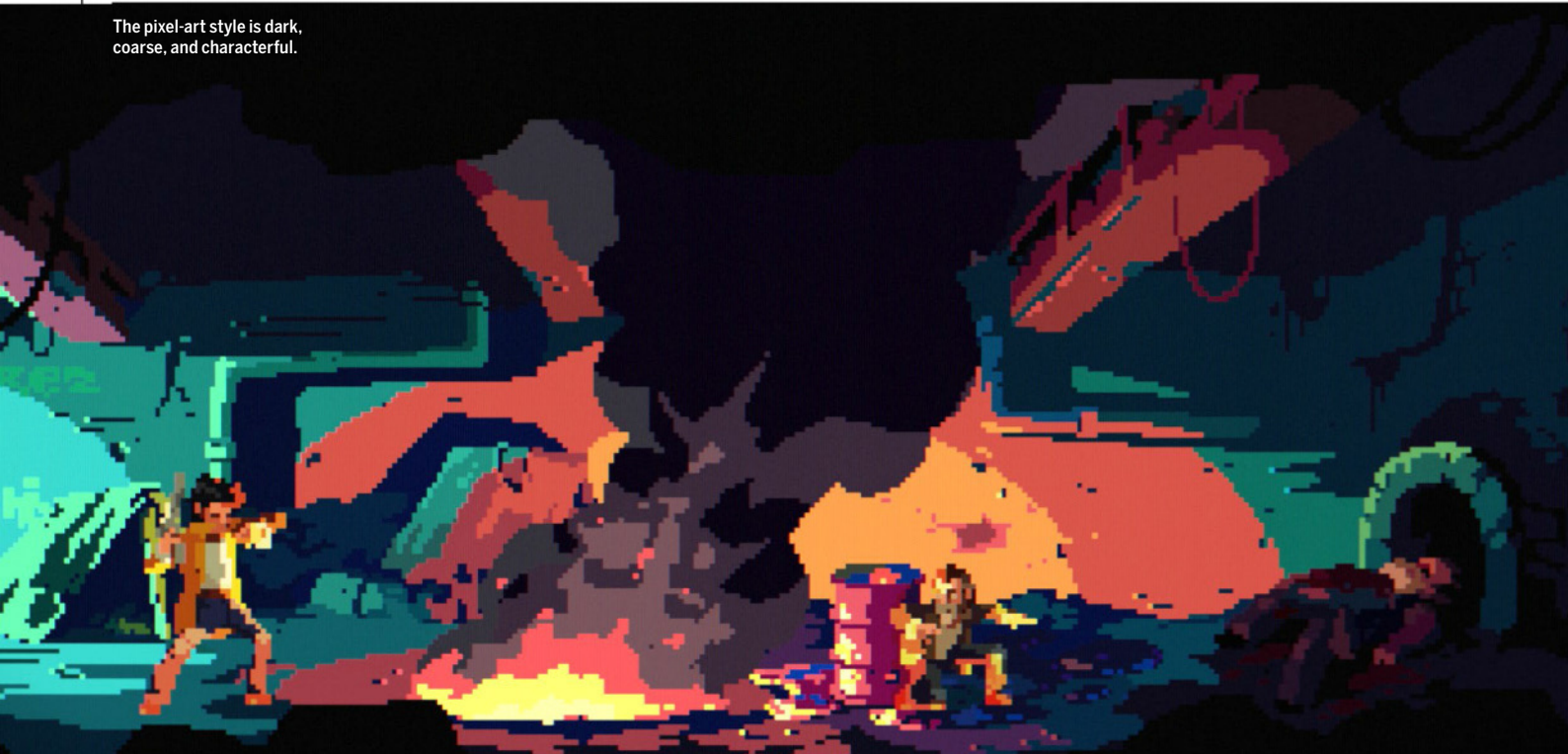
Building a real-time grand strategy game that starts at the end and challenges you to hold on for as long as possible is a fresh idea from young Australian developer Joe Gibbs, who's making it himself in his spare moments around a full-time job. If he can pull it off, and put out a full release later this year, then we could have a new strategy contender, and a game plan that's sure to be copied.

FIRST
LOOK

PREVIEW ROUNDUP

By Ian Evenden

The pixel-art style is dark, coarse, and characterful.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
July 17

DEVELOPER
Powerhoof, Dave Lloyd

PUBLISHER
Powerhoof

LINK
s.team/a/1170570

THE DRIFTER

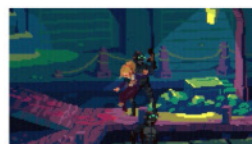
Conspiracies lurk in the pixel-art darkness

With its Australian accents, pixelated style and dark themes, there's a hint of *Beneath a Steel Sky* about *The Drifter*, but this point-and-click game, which begins with a violent death on a train and heads into some mature territory, such as homelessness and broken relationships, is all its own.

PLAYED IT

Mick is the drifter of the title, returning to a city he left five years ago for his mother's funeral. As he's hitchhiking rides on freight trains, and talks about visiting a shelter, it's tempting to call him unhoused, but he claims not to be, telling one character that he has places to stay. He has a lot of experience with that world, however, and carries a phone and charger with him to keep in touch with family and loved ones along with other essentials in his pack.

Following the shooting on the train, Mick gets embroiled in a conspiracy. Talking to a reporter, as well as other drifters living in an underpass, he



discovers that there are disappearances and tales of violence, with stories of monsters dragging people away.

OUT OF SIGHT

This all plays out in time-honoured point-and-click style, waving your pointer about to see if it changes when over the top of an interactable object, then finding out what you can do. Puzzles seem to be logical – combine petrol and a rubber hose to get a car engine working, for example, rather than requiring Gilbert-like leaps of the imagination, and there's a bar at the top of the screen that addresses a major issue many adventure players encounter: the need to remember topics of conversation. Happily, Mike just won't talk to people

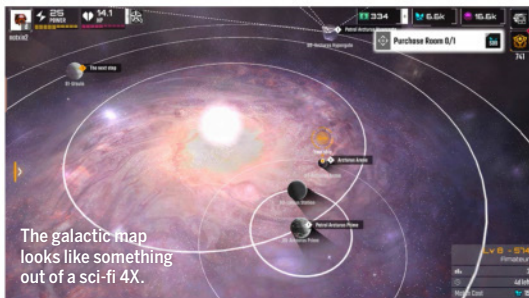
he's exhausted all his options with, avoiding the loop you can get into when trying to find someone you haven't spoken to yet.

The pixel-art style is dark and a bit coarse, but there's enough here to imply facial expressions, and usable items are nicely differentiated. It fits nicely with the atmosphere of the game, however, and means that when brighter sections are added, such as streetlamps or a burning brazier, the colour and contrast it creates means it stands out more. Even the Steam description of the game suggests darkness, mentioning shadowy corporations and "the thousand-year obsession of a madman".

What we see of this are soldiers in gear that's reminiscent of *Splinter Cell*'s Sam Fisher, presumably the glowing-eyed monsters of the stories. And they're not afraid to kill.

The Steam Next Fest demo is an extremely short one, but at the end we're treated to a montage of scenes from, presumably, later in the game, and it looks like keeping the quality level high. This is one for all our wishlists.

FOLLOWING THE SHOOTING, MICK GETS EMBROILED IN A CONSPIRACY



The galactic map looks like something out of a sci-fi 4X.



PIXEL STARSHIPS 2

It's not exactly rocket science

This MMO spaceship management and strategy game is also being developed for Android, but that makes it a shoo-in for low-spec PCs. Looking somewhat like the integrated graphics version of *EVE Online*, the game has you building characters then starships part by part, before taking them out to build

alliances and take over the galaxy. There's diplomacy, research and resources to manage, as well as glorious combat with sci-fi weapons.

Staying online to carry out raids and battles in MMOs has kept many players up all night, so it's good to see that *Pixel Starships 2* integrates programmable AI so that your fleet can continue to operate while you're catching some downtime. A market driven in-game economy should make it possible to grow rich and fat from ruling source-rich planets rather than having to take part in battles, too.

Away missions and monster fights on planets are where the game currently betrays its mobile roots the most, looking more like simple turn-based RPGs than *Mass Effect*, but this mix of *FTL* and *Starfield* could go far.

FIRST LOOK

RELEASE August 27	DEVELOPER SavySoda	PUBLISHER SavySoda	LINK s.team/a/2154270
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Hello, you're not Totoro...

FIRST LOOK

MANDRAKE

Even stranger horticulture

RELEASE TBA	DEVELOPER Failbetter Games	PUBLISHER Failbetter Games	LINK s.team/a/3710210
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Failbetter Games does *Stardew Valley* is an irresistible pitch. The *Fallen London* dev has revealed a new game in which you

plant seeds and harvest the results, explore the world, befriend a river, and take tea with a god.

There are mines in which there's sometimes

stone, villagers with important skills, a home to decorate, and lots of other life-sim staples with a mythological twist. Don't go out after dark.



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A SUBTERRANEAN WORLD THAT'S MORE
THAN IT SEEMS ON THE SURFACE...**



**...AND RECOVER THE STOLEN BANANAS
FROM THE MYSTERIOUS VOID COMPANY.**



BEAST

UNLE

COVER FEATURE

ASHED

DYING LIGHT: THE BEAST is a pivotal game for Techland – both a sequel and a return to roots that could serve as a blueprint for future games in the series

By Robert Zak

Dying Light: The Beast

Since the original *Dying Light* launched in 2015, Techland's rise has been meteoric – reflected in its impressive HQ on the outskirts of Wrocław, Poland. But numbers aren't everything for *Dying Light*'s franchise director Tymon Smektała. He knows that *Dying Light 2*, for all its commercial success, didn't quite satiate series fans, and is determined for *Dying Light: The Beast* to set the series' course for the future.

Founded in 1999, Techland spent years slowly building its reputation with well regarded but largely unknown games mainly for the European market (to this day, the studio's in-house engine is named after its 2003 sci-fi shooter *Chrome*). Larger-scale success came with *Call of Juarez* – a trilogy of Wild West shooters released in the early 2010s – and then *Dead Island*, but the studio really took flight with *Dying Light* in 2015, 16 years on from its founding (at a glance, the only independent developer with a similar path to success is Larian, which ticked along competently if unspectacularly for 12 years before its first major hit, *Divinity: Original Sin*, set it on the path to triple-A stardom).

But ever since Techland shook up the zombie genre by infusing it with parkour in a persistently threatening open-world environment, it's very much been the *Dying Light* studio, its offices in Poland's third-largest city a monument to the series' success. Stepping into the foyer, it's a cool combination of corporate slickness – a green wall next to a two-storey waterwall – with passionate geekery, represented by a life-size statue of a Volatile zombie looming over you as you enter the building.

Another thing I notice in that foyer is something that aptly represents Techland's current crossroads: an entire wall dedicated to all the awards and accolades won by *Dying Light* – not *Dying Light 2*, but the original 2015 game. While the second game was fairly well regarded, it was riddled with bugs on launch, and fans felt it lost some of the original's horror chops, focusing

instead on bifurcating, choice-driven storytelling and rather slow-grinding progression. The game sold very well, but was also undoubtedly running off the momentum of its predecessor, which as of this write-up is drawing more average daily players on Steam than its sequel. Again, this in no way makes *Dying Light 2* a failure, but clearly it has not resonated with fans over the long term like the original has.

CHEWING ON FEEDBACK

Smektała is candid about the difference between commercial success and creative success. “*Dying Light 2* reached 10 million players, so it's actually a tremendous result,” he begins. “But in terms of how we feel internally about the game and how players feel about the game, of course it could have been better, it should have been better.”

For Smektała, the reasons were manifold, all of which are being directly addressed in *The Beast*. First, there was the logistical nightmare of the pandemic striking in 2020, suddenly throwing a studio that had just massively expanded and moved into a new office, into an alien remote-working scenario.



ABOVE: The Alpine setting offers plenty of wilderness to explore, but parkour is still the star feature.

LEFT: Volatiles are back to being the near-unkillable nighttime threat they were in the first game.



TECHLAND SHOOK UP THE ZOMBIE GENRE BY INFUSING IT WITH PARKOUR

Techland's in-house Chrome engine resulted in a game that just felt different. "We lost some details that actually were super crucial to the gameplay," says Smektala. "And by that I mean physics simulation which was mostly visible in two areas – player movement in parkour, and enemy reactions. We realised that a lot of those small touches, those subtle little tweaks or settings, actually impacted the experience on a much bigger scale than anticipated."

With that in mind, Smektala's declarations in recent months that *Dying Light: The Beast*, originally planned as a DLC for *Dying Light 2*, is effectively *Dying Light 3* for Techland and could be as much a way to create separation between this game and the last as it is to generate hype – it's a distinct entry, not just a spin-off. Techland has also moved on from the triple-A sequel fallacy that bigger equals better. "I'm no longer convinced that the next title in the series should be bigger," he tells me. "I think it should be better, bring new elements, but I don't think it necessarily needs to be bigger, louder. We're not signing onto this philosophy."

The aftereffects of the pandemic are still palpable in the office. A dedicated massage room and barber – complete with red, white, and blue barber pole – sit disused (but weirdly well preserved) behind the cafeteria. Before the pandemic, working under the assumption that there would be a couple of hundred people in the office each day, these conveniences made perfect sense, but with the team only mandated to come in two days a week since the pandemic, they became redundant.

Four years on, Techland has now adapted to this flexible working arrangement, which has contributed to development on *Dying Light: The Beast* being "maybe the smoothest we've ever had" according to Smektala. "I think the last game that went so smoothly was *Call of Juarez: Gunslinger* [released in 2013], but of course that was a much smaller team and scope."

Then there were the technical problems with *Dying Light 2*, where moving it to a new version of

ALL ABOARD THE CRANE TRAIN

What Mr *Dying Light* brings to the game

1 MAN RAGE

Beast Mode offers explosive moments of catharsis in an oppressively tough environment. Your super-jump in Beast Mode also unleashes whole new levels of hardcore parkour.

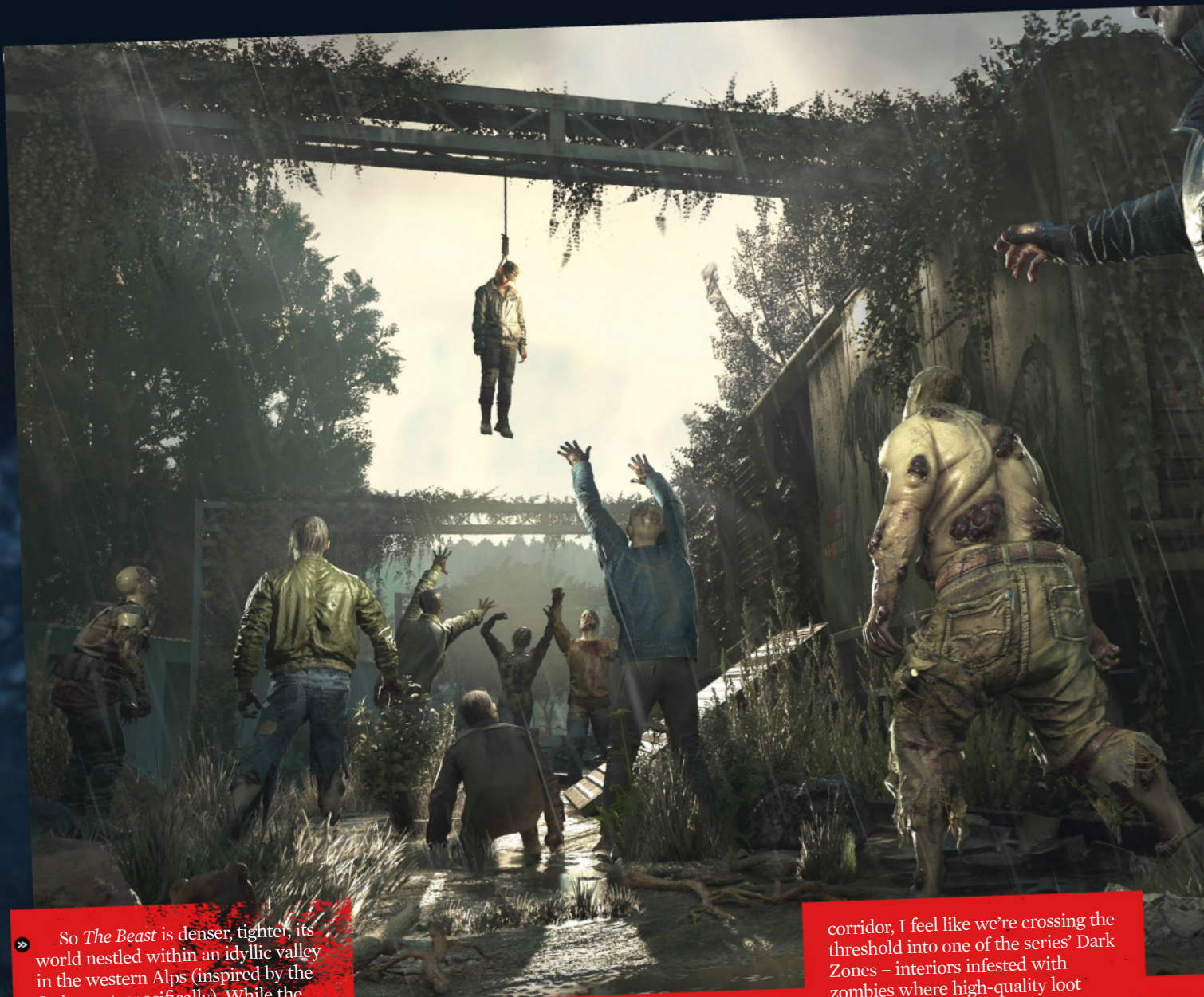
2 THAT KYLE STYLE

From the distinctive front kick to the running animations where he swings his weapon horizontally rather than vertically like that phony Aiden (kidding, love you *Dying Light 2*), Techland reinstated and refreshed several of Kyle's animations from the original game.

3 F-BOMBS AWAY

Kyle's more of a pottymouth than ever.





So *The Beast* is denser, tighter, its world nestled within an idyllic valley in the western Alps (inspired by the Swiss part, specifically). While the map is more or less the same size as one of the two maps featured in *Dying Light 2*, it's lent a sense of vastness by incorporating a lot more wilderness than previous entries: charming chalets surrounded by golden fields (good hiding places for dormant Infected), rustic villages, fog-enshrouded marshes, and classically alpine spruce and pine forests fill up much of the space between the once-civilised towns.

Smektala assures me that isn't just copy-paste Big Nature either. Given the map's relatively compact size, it doesn't need to be, and the wilderness is filled with natural or semi-natural 'dungeons' like caves and mines. Wherever you are, it often feels like there's a hotel, a village, or other distinctive remnant of civilisation in sight; you're never so deep in nature that you'll get lost, or bored, in it. "We have a very strong environmental design department – you could give them the surface of the Moon as a map and they'd make each part feel unique," says Smektala. "I don't want to overhype, but I do

think our open world is one of the most dense on the market for two reasons: parkour, and the overwhelming presence of zombies."

BELLY OF THE BEAST

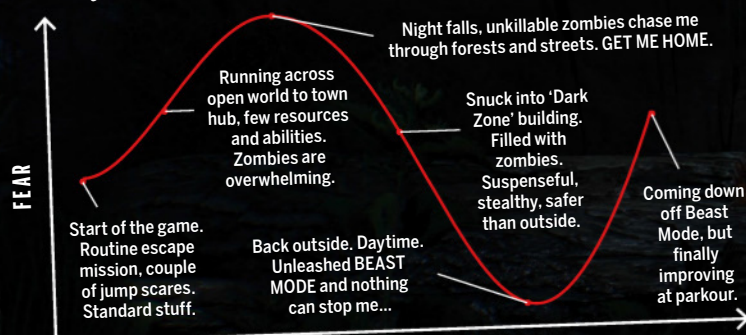
I soon get to put these claims to the test. Deep in the bowels of Techland, we arrive at its most impressive space. Heading down a darkening

corridor, I feel like we're crossing the threshold into one of the series' Dark Zones – interiors infested with zombies where high-quality loot awaits the daring – before we emerge onto a large space with boarded up windows, graffiti, dim lighting, old CRT monitors and ramshackle furnishings (complete with a sawn-off shotgun on the coffee table). A fake neon-lit bar at the end is lined with gherkins, beetroot and other Polish goodies in glass jars.

This room, essentially a movie set for *Dying Light 2*, would've seemed

THE HORRORGRAPH

A totally scientific chart of how my fear fluctuates



Dying Light: The Beast


like the perfect place to have my play session, but Techland went one better: we cross the corridor, and enter a room dedicated to *Dying Light: The Beast* – smaller, overgrown with creeping vines, and half-broken windows letting in sickly dusky light from ‘outside’. It’s painstakingly crafted, and there’s a metaphor in there somewhere about how the dimensions of the two distinct spaces reflect the two games’ contrasting design goals – one sprawling, semi-civilised, relatively colourful, the latter compact, object-dense, darker. So, with a moss-lined pond to my right, and half a pickup truck crashing in through the wall on my left, I sit down to play the first several hours of *Dying Light: The Beast*.

First up, the OG game’s hero Kyle Crane is back, as foul-mouthed and, uh, brown-haired as ever (I’m

apparently immune to the hype around this guy, who’s always struck me as a textbook gruff action-game hero circa 2005-2015, and suspect it’s more to do with the fact that he represents a spiritual homecoming to the first game). Now, however, Kyle’s just come out the ass-end of 13 years of scientific experiments, so he’s really pissed, and sports a scar over his right eye, which notably is a lupine shade of yellow.

Beastly yellow, some might say. See, that eye means Crane’s got high-level zombie DNA in him; not the kind that makes him stumble over his own feet and cause the flesh to drip down his face like a dying candle, but the good stuff: the kind that lets him jump 30 feet into the air and tear zombies in twain with his bare hands. Yes, a similar thing would happen at scripted moments in *Dying Light 2*, but now it’s a fully integrated mechanic, complete with a skill tree that you progress through by picking up blood samples from Chimera, who make up the game’s bosses.

And Beast Mode feels as power-trippy and primal as you’d expect. Having opted for the superfast running and ground-pound upgrades from the Beast skill tree, I would dart

TOP LEFT: Don’t let the idyll of the Swiss Alps fool you, this game is out for your blood.

MAIN: Kyle Crane is back, and boy is he grumpy about having superpowers.



**DEEP IN THE BOWELS OF
TECHLAND, WE ARRIVE AT ITS
MOST IMPRESSIVE SPACE**

**RARELY DID I FEEL SAFE
DURING MY SESSION,
BECAUSE THERE ARE NO
PARAPETS IN THE WILD**

MAIN: The forests make it easier for the player – and zombies – to hide.

TOP RIGHT: Fast-running virals are back, and here to welcome you with a rictus smile.

» between undead gaggles in one spree, tear at them with my bare hands – setting off the occasional animated kill for extra pizzazz – and feel unstoppable for a good ten seconds. It's a hell of a rush, but crucially it's very intermittent, which means it doesn't clash with Techland's goal to ramp up the fear factor.

On the horror front, Smyktała admits that things got a bit too focus-groupy with *Dying Light 2*. "Our internal data from *Dying Light 1* showed that more than 50% of players were basically skipping the night experience, so we said, 'OK, we have half of our players not playing half of our game, let's make it more accessible in *Dying Light 2*,'" he says. "We did that, but in effect we actually lost something that was very special about *Dying Light 1*, so

this time we said, 'Fuck accessibility, let's make it scary'."

To that end, Volatiles – hyper-aggressive zombies with four-way mouths that only come out at night – are back to being the nigh-unstoppable menace they were in the original game. The game is also much darker visually, which again nods to *Dying Light 1* while fitting with the more rural setting. During one amble around the forest after dark (terrible idea), I actually had to use the flashlight to find my way around.

I got some visual aid by using the scanner-like Survivor Sense – now pared back to only show bigger threats like Virals and Volatiles – to scope out my surroundings, and lo and behold there was a Volatile patrolling the woods about 20 feet away from me. As I cowered in the tall grass, the game's QA analyst Kuba Palen, who held my hand through the whole playthrough, told me, "We improved stealth a lot in *The Beast*. We have a lot more forests and that means there's a lot more bushes for you to hide in, so it's harder to find parkour opportunities out there, but



easier to find stealth opportunities.” Of course, stealth will only get me so far in my current predicament, and besides, sitting in a bush isn’t really what *Dying Light*’s all about. I take a deep breath, brace my thumb over the left analog stick, and send it for the nearest safe spot. Almost immediately, this triggers the guttural scream of the Volatile, which chain-triggers other Infected in the area to start shuffling invisibly through the darkness towards me.

And it’s here that I have my first *Dying Light* chase out in the

wilderness. Stripped of the escapatory powers of parkour, I’m running semi-blind between trees and stumbling down boulders to the nearest town, all too aware that the Volatile is faster than me. Just as I can practically feel the creature’s spittle on the back of my neck, I find a fence and hop over it into a village. The sudden shift from fumbling sprints through forests or fields to the liberating verticality of urban environments – from hostile terrain to advantageous terrain – adds an interesting new

dimension to the chase sequences, and ramps up the suspense.

DARK ZONE

Of course, I’m not safe yet in the cobbled streets of wherever I am, but at least now I’m in my element, swinging from balconies, scrambling up to rooftops, and hopping between them. With a bit of space between the Volatile and myself, I duck into a Dark Zone, which – zombie-infested though it may be – is a safer place to ride out that night than out there (and also lets me exercise that stealth skill I whacked a point into). The Dark Zones are a little more tailored this time around, and contain supplies dependent on the kind of building that you’re in – be it a fuel station, pharmacy, or residential complex. “We really wanted to make sure this time that the world feels more integrated,” Palen says. “The idea is we want you to be able to think, ‘OK, I need more medical supplies. I should go to the pharmacy.’ That kinda stuff.”

With less cityscape to hop around in, the world trades off just a fraction of that parkour playfulness for extra atmosphere. Rarely did I feel safe during my session, because there are no parapets in the wild, and no super-liberating ways to traverse the map. While you still unlock a grappling hook eventually, paragliders have been dropped. “We felt that paragliders meant you weren’t engaging with the world enough,” Palen tells me. “If you’re flying over

DYING FOR CHANGE

Distinct, uh, creatures?

25% HORROR

Volatiles are tougher, world is darker, you are more isolated.

40% WORLD

Fewer people, more zombies. A very different place to explore.



15% STORY

Techland says it just wants to focus on telling a good story.

15% PROGRESSION

Faster progression, some locked abilities available by default.

5% PARKOUR

The lifeblood of the series. Rural parkour needs some polish.

COVER FEATURE

Dying Light: The Beast

✦ it, you're not experiencing it." I get it, *Dying Light* isn't an adventure holiday; if you want paragliders and wingsuits and all those Red Bull things, there's always *Far Cry*.

Instead, you have cars, but as I quickly discover, *The Beast* turns even these safe mobile havens into potent vehicles for horror. The 4x4s accelerate slowly to low top speeds, and zombies can leap onto the bonnet and smash through your windscreen. They're very much made for getting between towns rather than weaving through them, where you can get overwhelmed. It's also kind of hard to tell what's destructible and what's not when you're driving. I got jammed several times on innocuous-looking branches on the ground.

Oddities in object collision and readability bring me on to one of the niggles from my session. Smektała states that *The Beast's* new, naturalistic environment is an opportunity for the studio to "challenge ourselves and see if we can make *Dying Light* work in an environment other than just a city" and there were quite a few times in my playthrough when I felt the game struggling against the irregular geometry of that environment. There are plenty of cliffs and rock faces to scale out there, with chalk marks indicating ledges to latch onto, but Kyle's ability to make the right move regularly felt off.

The latching-on points often weren't reacting as

smoothly as they should've been, such as when I tried leapfrogging off a conveniently broken tree onto a climbable wall across a small ravine, but the tree wasn't being treated as a parkour object, or when I was clambering around inside a mine and Kyle struggled to detect the right surfaces to jump to (as well as it not always being clear which ledges were chalk-marked climbable ones and which weren't). As things stand, the non-urban areas feel a bit clunky to climb and leap around in.

STICKING THE LANDING

Being a shorter game, *The Beast* speeds up skill acquisition from its predecessor, and starts Kyle – who's no newbie – off with previously



MAIN: The ferocious power of Beast Mode lets Kyle squash zombies like Play-Doh.

TOP RIGHT: Kill a Chimera, and it will drop a blood sample that lets Kyle unlock new Beast abilities.



LOCALISED DAMAGE MEANS THAT YOU CAN SLASH A ZOMBIE'S JAW OFF WITH A MACHETE



unlockable skills such as the running slide, perfect dodge, and perfect parry. Combat, meanwhile, feels more visceral than ever, addressing the complaints of it feeling unimpactful and floaty in the previous game on launch.

Swinging a bat at a zombie's head, it gives a delightful clong on

impact with a chunk of skull breaking off as it stumbles in the direction I whacked it, before continuing to shamble after me with only half a head. Localised damage means that you can slash a zombie's jaw off with a machete, cave their chest in with a sledgehammer, and all that other nasty stuff that us sickos want from our zombie games. Those stylish slow-mo X-ray kills, however, are out. "That's part of the 'grounding' we're going for in *The Beast*, where we didn't want to pull the player out of the moment," Paleń explains to me.

GOING VIRAL

Techland wants future *Dying Light* games to be smaller



HAWAII

There's something about the clash of tropical paradise with zombie apocalypse that just hits right. A towering Honolulu-like city flanked by beaches, maybe a volcano?



SOUTH AMERICA

You know what they have a lot of in South America? Llamas. But also, verticality. A mountainous city based on La Paz or Rio would be well suited to free-running, and that'll be a lot of fun.



POLAND

Techland pays tribute to its home country by injecting pierogi into every *Dying Light* game, but why not set it in Warsaw? The mix of gloomy sights and old towns would make a great parkour playground.



BRITAIN

Given Techland's penchant for not using real cities, it'd be fun to see how they could take a city as iconic as London and make it not London. Grand old-timey churches and foggy pubs.

On the surface, *Dying Light: The Beast* is more a sequel to the first game than the second, but one that's integrated many of the lessons from *Dying Light 2*'s tough development and launch. Progression is quicker, choice-driven storytelling has been dropped, and all those little touches that made the original game more of a horror have been reinstated in a new type of world that feels wilder.

It feels like an alternative *Dying Light* experience rather than the 'definitive' one, which is in line with Smektała's vision for the future of the series. "These kinds of 30, 40-hour experiences is what we'll be looking at in the future. This feels like the most balanced type of game that we can make, both in terms of how much it costs, time, and human effort. We don't want to put out a game every year, or two years even, but with each game we want to do something different." *The Beast* is shaping up to be that – an Alpine twist on a refined template, and a game that Techland hopes will provide a solid foundation for the future of the series. ■

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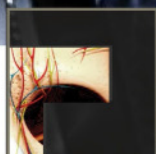


MACH I

DEUS EX's influence can be quietly felt throughout gaming like the tendrils of a clandestine organisation, but it could have ended up a Command & Conquer game if not for an unlikely intervention. This is the story of how it was made, 25 years ago

By Robert Zak

NE GOD



DEUS

ven for those who haven't played *Deus Ex* (charlatans), the name carries weight, echoing 25 years on from its launch through the halls of gaming history like that of a half-forgotten Hellenic deity; its pioneering commitment to systems and experimentation as a form of player expression mixed into the foundations of so many games that came after – from *Dishonored* to *Cyberpunk 2077*, from *Oblivion* to *Far Cry*.

A genre mashup, an 'immersive simulation', a conspiracy thriller that offers wide, webbing paths through each mission (which might come down to creating a stairway of crates of increasing size, bribing junkies with drugs or kids with candy, or carving straight through with a cybersword). There were many ways to pitch *Deus Ex* back in the day, but none of them particularly succinct. *Deus Ex* is a game that shines not in the boardroom, but in the hands of the gamer, with its toolbox of skills, augmentations, and sprawling levels in their hands. Getting the game to that point, however, would prove to be an almost insurmountable challenge for its creator Warren Spector.

Spector's first pitch for a proto-*Deus Ex* was at Origin Systems around 1994, after he had completed work on *Ultima Underworld 2*. *Troubleshooter*, as it was known, was

to be a "real-world roleplaying game" borne of Spector's weariness of gaming's rigid tropes at the time. "I was sick to death of space marines and alien invasions and mages with fireballs and pointy hats," he begins. "I had made enough of those and wanted to do something different."

The initial story was far less refined than the grim near-future vision *Deus Ex* would grow into. The hero was called Jake Shooter, and he was the man that intelligence agencies would call in for the jobs that were just too damn tough for other agents to take on. But Spector was wary of overpromising how much of the 'real world' the game would simulate. "The game was going to be set in the current day, but I realised early on that players all knew how the current day worked," he says. "They knew how a phone worked, how a TV worked, how a computer worked. We couldn't simulate anything at a level of detail that would meet players' expectations."

The solution was to set the game in the near future, "So when people say, 'Telephones don't work that way,' we could say, 'Oh yeah? In the future they do! Welcome to 2052.'"

Incidentally, today in 2025, Denton's main mode of communication – a neurally implanted Infolink that allows for hands-free video calling – feels as on-track as ever for how virtual communication might evolve over the next couple of decades.

Between them, Origin Systems and Looking Glass Studios were responsible for mould-breaking games such as *System Shock*, *Thief* and *Ultima Underworld*, all of which aligned philosophically with *Deus Ex*. Yet despite Spector's clout at these studios and having been involved in the creation of all those games, he couldn't sell them on the idea. *Deus Ex*'s genre-bending just didn't sit well at a time when genre was deemed a guiding principle in a game's

marketability. "*Deus Ex* was part shooter, part stealth game, part RPG. I mean, how do you sell that?" Spector asks. "The argument I got from the *Thief* folks was that if you give players a gun, they won't sneak. I was also asked, 'Why don't you just make a shooter?' I learned the power of the word 'no' when pitching *Deus Ex*, let me tell you!"

In a parallel reality not too far removed from ours, *Deus Ex* exists in the form of a *Command & Conquer* game instead. "I was about to sign a contract with Westwood to make a *Command & Conquer* roleplaying game," Spector tells me. "My plan was just to take the genre-mashup, player choice elements from *Troubleshooter* and set it in the *C&C* universe. From a gameplay perspective, I was at a point where I was going to find a way to make it one way or another, even if it meant making another damn sci-fi game!"

But in 1997 fate intervened, driving down through Texas with flowing hair, a boyish smile, and a rockstar aura (or gaming's equivalent, at least). Designer Steve Powers, who along with Spector was part of the Looking Glass Austin team that had

"THE ARGUMENT WAS THAT IF YOU GIVE PLAYERS A GUN, THEY WON'T SNEAK. 'WHY DON'T YOU MAKE A SHOOTER?'"

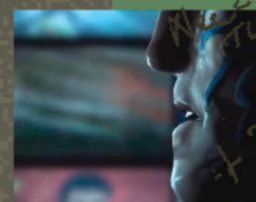
AN UNLIKELY REVIVAL

Deus Ex's weird, warped PS2 version



ORCHESTRAL MUSIC

The theme music received an orchestral overhaul (listen closely enough, and you can even hear the conductor right at the end).



CGI CUTSCENES

Making the game a bit more cinematic, cutscenes got the CGI treatment rather than just characters moving their mouths like ventriloquist dummies.



REDESIGNED LEVELS

Many of the levels were reworked to fit the hardware limitations of the PS2. While the levels are by no means superior, they offer a fresh experience.



SIMPLER UI

Because console players were seen as simpletons (also because of gamepads), the UI is cleverly condensed. You no longer need medical bots to install augs etc.



1



2

1 The Ion Storm Dallas team outside a restaurant serving \$1 tacos. Different times.

2 Early concept art of Gunther Hermann.

3 *Deus Ex* maps were made to be layered, with many routes to completion.

been laid off during *Thiefs* development in 1997, recalls being in the then-unemployed Looking Glass office, when the team received an unexpected visitor, "We just sort of hung out there, prototyping things and playing around," he begins. "And then had this surreal moment when John Romero drove down from Dallas in his yellow Humvee with his purple shiny pants and said, 'I want all of you guys to come with me and make whatever you want!'"

Romero, who had founded Ion Storm the previous year and was working on the ill-fated *Daikatana* from a \$2m penthouse HQ in Dallas' Chase Tower, convinced Spector not to sign on with Westwood with an irresistible offer, "Make the game of your dreams. No creative interference. You'll have the biggest



3

» budget you've ever had. You'll have the biggest marketing budget you've ever had," Spector paraphrases Romero. "Who says no to that?"

Knowing what we know now about the chaotic development and wanton spending surrounding *Daikatana*, it's quite possible that Romero's offer came from a place of good-intentioned but reckless naivety. Nevertheless, Spector says that, "John lived up to every promise he made that day". Beyond giving Spector carte blanche to make his dream game, Romero would go on to have no involvement with *Deus Ex*, and yet without him *Deus Ex* wouldn't exist.

GATHERING STORM

Ion Storm Austin was founded on the ruins of Looking Glass Studios, and work started on *Deus Ex* immediately. Harvey Smith was brought on as lead designer, joined by fledgling designers Ricardo Bare and Monte Martinez (all of whom, along with Steve Powers, went on to work together at Arkane Studios). Martinez came from a background of *Quake* modding, and admitted that outside of 3D level design "had no idea what I was doing", while Smith says that conflicts would arise with the programming team due to the designers' combination of inexperience and dizzying ambition. "We were all young and volatile and not great developers in the technical

EXPRESS YOURSELF

A lot of the player expression in *Deus Ex*



CYBERNINJA

Augs: Speed Enhancement, Regeneration, Cloak, Combat Strength

Skills: Low-Tech (3)

Combine these abilities with the frankly overpowered Dragontooth Sword, and you'll have a lethal melee build that lets JC do his best 'Cyborg Ninja from *Metal Gear Solid*' impression.



TINKERER

Augs: Spy Drone, Power Recirculator, Vision Enhancement

Skills: Computers (3), Electronics (3), Lockpicking (2)

Gain mastery over your environment, turning turrets and bots to your side, opening all areas, and having complete awareness of enemy positioning. Just add a weapon skill.



PACIFIST

Augs: Radar Transparency, Cloak, Run Silent,

Skills: Low-Tech (3), Pistol (3), Computers (3), Electronics (3)

The best way to not kill people is to not get seen. The only non-lethal ranged weapon in the game is the mini-crossbow loaded with tranquilliser darts.

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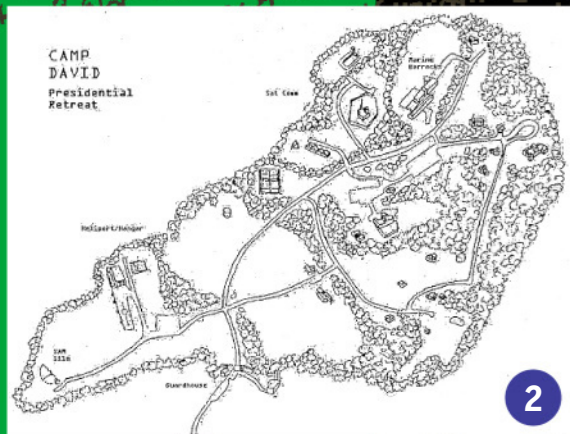


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2

1 Early concept art of JC Denton, before he got over his anime phase.

2 Maps of the Camp David Presidential Retreat which never made it into the game.

3 Environmental storytelling paints a picture of a world ravaged by drugs and disease.



3



sense,” Smith admits. “The engineers routinely had to deal with people who were blue-skying things, or trying to recreate a spy-oriented D&D campaign, which must have been a nightmare for them.”

While Dungeons & Dragons wasn’t an explicit inspiration for *Deus Ex*, it was always in the air at Ion Storm, with games ongoing amidst discussions of creative solutions to encounters and the impact of different builds on a campaign. “It was hugely influential,” says Bare. “Even down the road as Ion Storm progressed and later at Arkane Studios when we’d be hiring, we were like, ‘You know what the secret sauce to our level design is?’ Most of us understand what it is to be a good dungeon master or to experience a good campaign.”

If *Deus Ex* had a development problem, it was ideas overload. Early in development there were hundreds of characters, missions set in space, a Mexican invasion of the US, and even a mission in the White House that involved the president being a clone, holding his daughter hostage (Martinez shows me a 360-page design document during our call, though the original was over 500).

Eventually, this was trimmed down to several hubs – New York City, Hong Kong and Paris – with smaller levels branching either off of or between those.

In a trait later upheld by *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* and *Mankind Divided*, these hubs were dense rather than wide, with Ion Storm’s objective being to fill each one with story and interactivity. In Hell’s Kitchen, for instance, you have subway systems, bars, warehouses, and a hotel (where, in one of the rooms, a couple of drug addicts lie dead on grubby mattresses). In the subway, you’ll find enclaves of homeless shuffling about beneath the streets above, which are a warzone between counter-terror group UNATCO and the NSF. Hell’s Kitchen is a dilapidated, crumbling

place where supplying a junkie with Zyme is just as likely to get you answers as namedropping the fact that you work with the world’s leading counter-terror organisation.

Hong Kong was the charge of Steve Powers and lead writer Sheldon Pacotti, who Smith described as “lightning in a bottle” for his ability to craft compelling stories while still understanding the technical constraints of the engine and level design. Where New York was an introduction to the game’s systems, with Hong Kong Powers felt that, “It was the right time to start layering in more drama and character interaction, adding more complexity for the characters to navigate”. He continues: “Hong Kong may seem sprawling, but it’s really very cellular, chopped into small bits to manage having multiple story NPCs available without bleeding into combat spaces or damaging performance. The open city is an illusion, because it’s really tunnels and rooms.”

While Pacotti ribs Powers for Hong Kong’s intricate maze of canals, underwater areas and markets, he says that it in fact made his job as a writer easier. “As a young interactive writer, I thought it would

be great to throw myself into writing massively complicated branching conversations that took into account every permutation of who-you-met-or-killed-or-rescued,” Pacotti tells me. “Eventually, though, the design process led to a more reasonable

“I WAS TRYING VERY HARD TO BE ‘SERIOUS’, TO CRAFT REAL DIALOGUE AND KEEP THE FICTION CONSISTENT”

gating structure that balanced narrative flow and exploration.”

Coming from a non-videogame background, Pacotti was influenced more by sci-fi and speculative fiction than the limited videogame storytelling tropes of the time. “When writing *Deus Ex*, I was trying very hard to be ‘serious’, to craft absolutely real dialogue and keep the fiction internally consistent – I killed a label that read ‘Flux Capacitor’, for instance,” Pacotti recalls.



HEALTH CHUNKS

Your health is split into separate body parts, so you can find yourself crawling around if you lose your legs (hey, free stealth!), while smoking too many ciggies can kill you by draining your Torso to 0.

CRAP-NAV

Apparently, navigation augmentations aren't a thing in 2052, so you rely on the old-school navigation method of a compass and landmarks to find your way around – not very techy, but immersive at least!



**“WHAT DEUS
EX NEEDED
ALL THROUGH
THE PROJECT
WAS TO CUT
20 OR 30%
OF THE GAME”**

» To get his mind going, Pacotti would read Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* during lunch breaks. While Pynchon's novel, with its sentient lightbulbs and soothsaying erections, ventured deeper into the realms of the weird than *Deus Ex*, its world of paranoia, psychological warfare, and clandestine organisations was a perfect backing track for writing

Deus Ex's narrative, where Ion Storm's goal was to embed almost every space with story and meaning. “Everything needs to be dipped in narrative, which means that the more space you make, the more conceptual work you're making,” Harvey Smith tells me. “From my perspective, what *Deus Ex* – and honestly, half the games we've worked on – needed all through the project was to cut 20 or

AUGMENTATION SOUP

Combine augs for fun effects, such as Spy Drone and Power Recirculator for a long-lasting robopal, or the speedrunners' favourite: Cloak and Speed Enhancement, which will get you through the game quicker than Manderley can say "GROW UP, JC!"



30% of the game." The protagonist quickly evolved from the action hero Spector first conceived to JC Denton, a nano-augmented rookie working his first day on the job. The early parts of the game where you're working for UNATCO before realising that they're just a puppet for the bad guys, is almost comfortingly humdrum. You return to your underground base between missions,

shoot the shit with colleagues, and get paid by your boss – complete with bonuses for completing secondary objectives.

"I was thinking about *Half-Life* as I watched Warren throw a basketball around the UNATCO offices, during my interview," says Pacotti. "I realised that this was the team taking game storytelling to the next level." There were plenty of red

flags that UNATCO isn't what it seems if you nosed around enough (the game deftly rewarded exploration with insight into the world), but it almost felt cosy, which made the rift that occurred later feel all the more dramatic.

Deus Ex settled you into the 'just doing your job' fantasy for a lot longer than *Half-Life* before caving it all in around you. Having to later

25 Years of *Deus Ex*

» break out of UNATCO HQ as an escaped prisoner – choosing who to kill and who to spare among your former coworkers – is a brilliant inversion of your ‘home’ space, because what better way to represent a point of no return for Denton than having to battle (or sneak) his way out of his own HQ?

Part of *Deus Ex*’s enduring mystique is its uncanny prescience in foreshadowing today’s geopolitical climate: the War on Terror; a global virus whose still-unconfirmed origin raises conspiratorial eyebrows; a society enshrouded in surveillance and corporate influence, not to mention that the kinds of fringe conspiracy theories explored in *Deus Ex* are today given far more visibility due to the combined mania of social media, the internet, and deep distrust in politics. The team, however, unanimously states that the game’s ideas originated from sci-fi rather than some kind of political conscience. “I was in my mid-20s, so I definitely wasn’t thinking on that level,” Ricardo Bare tells me. “It was more like ‘I really like shooters, I really like RPGs, Oh my God, somebody’s combining these and I get to work on one!’”

Spector, meanwhile, has firm views on political commentary and gaming. “I’m a big believer that if you want to make a statement, you should make a movie or write a book,” he begins. “What I thought about things didn’t matter in *Deus Ex*. What I think is the right future for humanity is irrelevant. It’s all about what each player thinks. I didn’t want to tell them the state of the world, I wanted them to act and see the state of the world that resulted from their choices.”

INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

In the end, *Deus Ex*’s story hinged more on the intimacy and relationships between the characters rather than spectacular set-pieces, White House infiltrations, or social

commentary. The relationship between JC and his brother Paul, who you may or may not save, punches through the quaintly monotonous voice acting to make you invested in both of them getting through this; there’s pensive Illuminati heiress Nicolette DuClare, who revisits her childhood home and grieves the lost simplicity of her childhood. Even your Arnie-voiced rival Gunther, largely played for comic-relief, is filled with pathos, having mutilated his body for UNATCO only for it to have become archaic and outmoded compared to JC’s better-integrated design. The fact that you can save Gunther from NSF captivity in the very first mission of the game emphasises his obscurity, but that didn’t stop him serving UNATCO to the very end.

Comparatively low-budget and low-hassle compared to the development maelstrom that was *Daikatana*, publisher Eidos was almost hand-wavy about *Deus Ex*’s development. “We went in ready to fight and argue and lobby for another four to six months of development time, and they were like, ‘Sure, it’s probably better anyway if you are not in our hair

right now,’” Smith recalls, adding that the hard-partying culture over at the Dallas *Daikatana* studio meant that when Eidos suits would rarely make it to the Austin studio on the stateside visits. “They would fly over these British guys and they would just get hammered

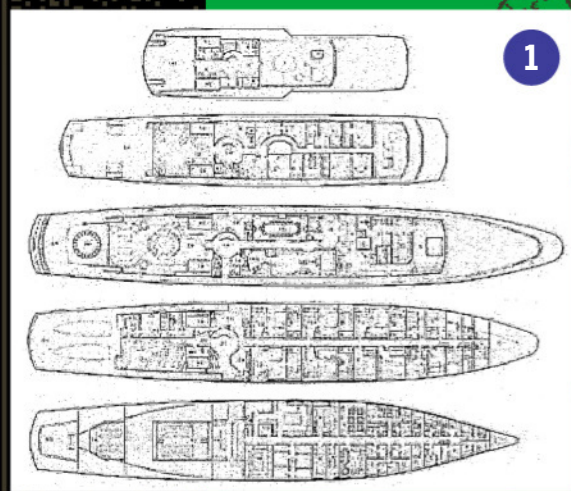
with the Dallas team for three days straight. This happened three or four times over the years where Warren and the team were prepping for the visit from Eidos and they would send a mail on the last day like, ‘Guys, we partied a little too hard in Dallas and we’re not gonna make it this summer.’”

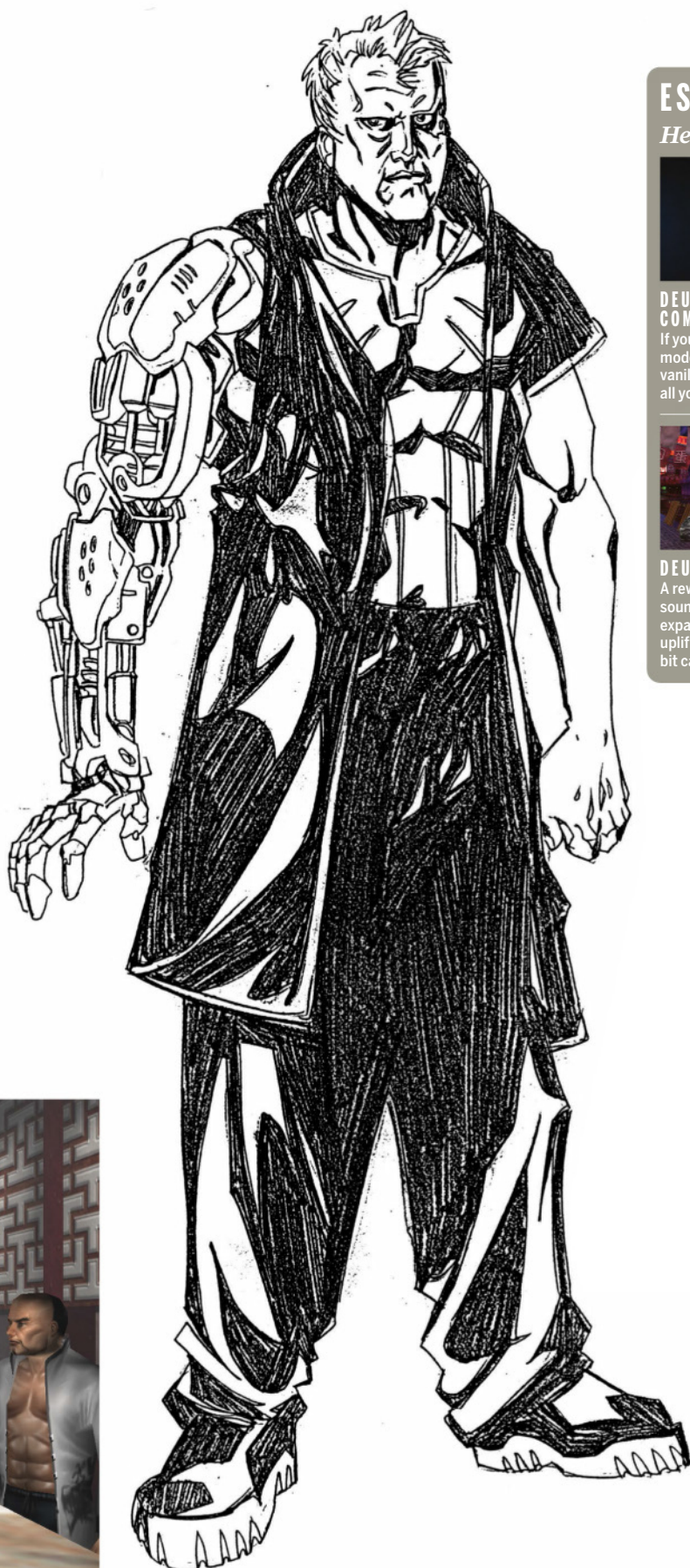
That extra four to six months after the game hit 1.0 is what helped *Deus Ex* ascend from a good game to a great one in Smith’s eyes, and is

1 Floorplan sketches of the yacht of Juan Ivanovich Lebedev, big-deal drug lord.

2 The Hong Kong hub squeezes a ton of exploration, NPCs, and liveliness into a deceptively small space.

3 Some later sketches of Gunther Hermann showing his augmentations.





ESSENTIAL AUGMENTATIONS

Here are the best mods



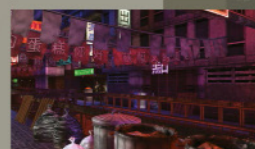
DEUS EX COMMUNITY UPDATE

If you want an experience on your modern rig that's as close to vanilla as possible, then this is all you need.



DEUS EX TRANSCENDED

Hundreds of bug fixes, and support for widescreen, high resolutions, plus modern iterations of Direct3D (D3D9 recommended) and OpenGL.



DEUS EX REVISION

A reworking that includes a new soundtrack, redesigned and expanded levels, and a visual uplift for a game that looked a bit cardboardy back in 2000.



GMDX

Bundles in two of the most popular graphical overhauls – HDTP and New Vision – to give the game a grittier, far more detailed aesthetic.

something that he championed at Arkane with *Dishonored*.

When asked about *Deus Ex*'s legacy, for Ricardo Bare, Monte Martinez, Steve Powers and Harvey Smith there was no question: it was right there in our group call. The four became best friends, going on to work together for the remaining years of Ion Storm, and later at Arkane Studios, their creative bond strengthening over the years to help them create games that very much built on *Deus Ex*'s im-sim lineage. "I think it's part of the reason why some of the games that we've worked on together have been so good," says Bare. "We have this shorthand, a shared design and intuition."

For Spector, *Deus Ex* was a "frustration-driven project" with a point to prove: that games could be made where the player is entrusted to craft their own story. "Given how many developers have told me they got into games or started a studio because of *Deus Ex*, how many people have told me they changed the way they thought about design as a result, I guess it'd be disingenuous of me to say we didn't make something special," Warren concludes. "I mean, the fact that we're still talking about *Deus Ex* here, 25 years later, and people are still playing the game... that says something, doesn't it?" ■

REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Utterly broken or offensively bad; no value.

Example *Big Brother*, *Mad Dog McCree*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Skull Island: Rise of Kong*, *ShellShock: Nam '67*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Underworld Ascendant*, *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort.

Examples *Sonic: Lost World*, *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare III*, *Redfall*, *Lego Horizon Adventures*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed especially well.

Examples *Minecraft Legends*, *Senua's Saga: Hellblade II*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *New World*, *Skull and Bones*, *Forspoken*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Deep Rock Galactic*, *Star Wars Outlaws*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments. We love it.

Examples *Age of Wonders 4*, *Hell Divers II*

90%-94% Important to PC gaming and ahead of its time.

Examples *Elden Ring*, *Factorio*, *Balatro*

95%-98% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Baldur's Gate 3*, *Minecraft*, *Metaphor: ReFantazio*

99%-100% Advances the human species. Provides a transcendent feeling not dissimilar to the ending of Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



King of kings

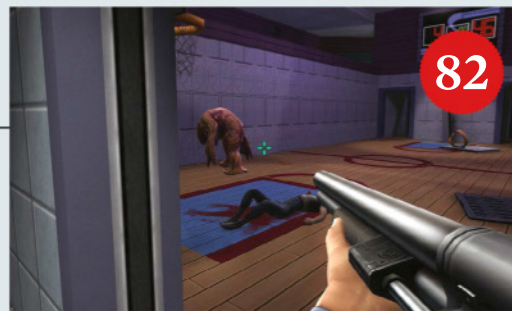
For a long time Bethesda was the king of kings when it came to making first-person perspective RPGs. Now-legendary titles such as *Oblivion* and *Skyrim* changed PC gaming forever with gripping virtual worlds which, despite their bugs and jank, immersed the gamer totally right from the off and never let it slip. So it was really disappointing to see that the old-school Bethesda magic was largely absent in its most recent RPG, *Starfield*, that lost me in its staid intro and empty, largely immersion-free depiction of humanity's future.

This is why, as our review this issue shows, *The Fall of Avalon: Tainted Grail* is well worth checking out. This is a fantasy RPG that manages to rekindle that old Bethesda magic, with a weird and immersive take on the legend of King Arthur that's gripping and tons of fun. Play it.

R. Jones

ROBERT JONES
PRINT EDITOR
robert.jones@futurenet.com

**LET US KNOW
WHAT YOU THINK**
Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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This month's Freman reviewers...



CHRIS LIVINGSTON

Specialist in
Sticky steeds

Currently playing
Dune: Awakening

This month
Shrank himself so he could ride his garden's earthworms. Yeehaw!



MOLLIE TAYLOR

Specialist in
Sticky drinks

Currently playing
Stellar Blade

This month
Toured PC Gamer Towers kicking each vending machine until it gave her a can of pop.



TED LITCHFIELD

Specialist in
Sticky situations

Currently playing
System Shock 2

This month
Kept uploading the Crazy Frog ringtone to Shodan's AI core and programmed it to loop.



RICK LANE

Specialist in
Sticky notes

Currently playing
FBC: Firebreak

This month
Left a sticky note on his 'Moist Maker' sarnie. Editor Rob ate it. "My sandwich!" rang out.



MATT ELLIOTT

Specialist in
Sticky substances

Currently playing
Ghostbusters

This month
Pointed his 'proton cannon' at a 'ghost' and 'powered it up'. Goo went everywhere. Oh Matt.



SPICE JAM

Craft and fight for your life on Arrakis in Funcom's survival MMO **DUNE: AWAKENING**

By Christopher Livingston

I'm collecting the most valuable substance in the universe, spice, when a sandworm explodes out of the dunes a few meters in front of me. I knew it was coming – it always does – but I didn't expect it to pop up so close to me. I yell a bad word and leap into the cockpit of my ornithopter as my entire screen fills with a gaping mouth the size of a subway tunnel.

I know I'm just sitting at my desk holding down my space bar, but in my head I'm pulling up on the control stick of my ornithopter with all my strength as bad words continue to pour out of me. If this worm swallows me I'll lose everything: my thopter, the spice in my pockets, everything else in my pockets, and even the pockets themselves. I'll respawn in just my undies and have to re-craft my armour, weapons, tools and vehicle. Fear is the mind-killer, but a sandworm is the gear-killer.

ENOUGH ALTITUDE

I gain just enough altitude to escape, but I legitimately have to take a few moments for my heart to stop pounding before I can set back down on the sand to continue my spice collecting. The prospect of losing

everything to a sandworm is just one reason why even 100 hours in, *Dune: Awakening* is still a thrill.

Funcom's survival MMO is a lot of things: a compelling PvE sandbox you can play alone, a co-op survival game you can conquer with friends, and a cutthroat PvP extraction game that doesn't even enter the mix until you've played for about 80 hours. Some of this Funcom pulls off successfully, some is a bit rough, but

the parts of *Dune: Awakening* that work are great enough to justify enduring the stuff that doesn't.

The opening hours of *Dune: Awakening* do what every survival game should: make you feel fragile, weak and desperate. In this alt-history version of Arrakis, the planet is in the midst of a protracted civil war between House Atreides and the Harkonnens – which helps explain

The sun is so scalding you have to creep between the shadows

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A survival MMO set in the Dune universe

EXPECT TO PAY
£42

DEVELOPER
Funcom

PUBLISHER
Funcom

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7 9700K,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 4070 Ti

MULTIPLAYER
Yes
LINK
duneawakening.com

why the desert is absolutely littered with spaceship wreckage you can harvest for crafting.

THIRST AID

The only source of water in those early hours is licking dew from a few scattered plants, the sun is so scalding you have to creep between the shadows, and at night Sardaukar ships patrol the skies sending down heavily-armed assassins to waste you if you're spotted. It's a suitably tough introduction to the dangers of the desert planet, but you're not powerless for long. Within a few hours you'll have the tools to build your first base and even craft a vehicle to begin braving the dunes and sandworms that lurk beneath it.

Dune: Awakening's survival loop can get pretty grindy. There's an early stage when the only worthwhile source of water is blood, and I found myself regularly stopping what I was doing just to make joyless blood runs: completing quick circuits of the same handful of NPC caves and camps to suck 'em dry.

Progress to more elegant water collection options eventually appears, like tools that harvest dew from plants and windtraps that capture moisture from the air, though as crafting gets more complex it requires shocking amounts of water, meaning it's never a bad time to cosplay a desert vampire and collect a few extra litres of blood. Stockpiling other resources in the mid-to-late game grows monotonous, too: some only appear as loot in certain NPC strongholds, and only in small amounts, which means repeatedly raiding the same locations.

But there's also the kind of grind I really enjoy, too. I love hopping in a buggy and driving out for a resource run, using a mining laser to extract minerals from boulders in the mountains or crystals in the murky ravines. I'm always happy to fly my thopter out to the dunes to collect a resource called flour sand, dodging

WHATCHA DRINKIN'?

Water is key

25% MACHINES
Build windtraps that suck moisture from the air. They cost, though.

39% BODIES
Dissolve entire corpses in Fremen deathstills. Is that creepy? Yes.

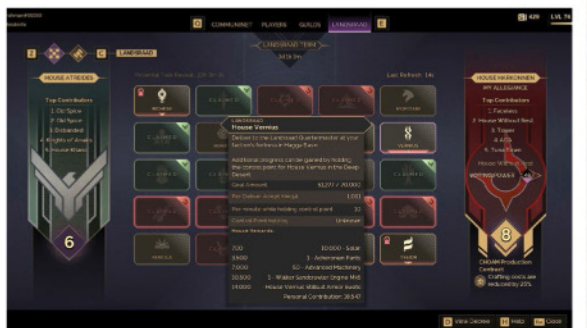


19% PLANTS
Harvesting dew from leaves near dawn is a great non-violent option.

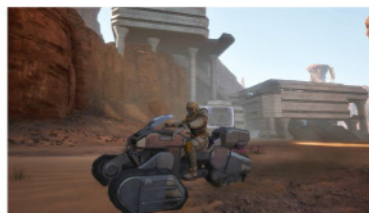
16% BLOOD
Drained from the eight dudes I just killed and filtered into fresh water.

1% MICE
You can drink 'em! But you shouldn't. They're adorable.

Arrakis: where even friendly characters will stick a gun in your face.



FAR LEFT: Side with Harkonnen or Atreides in the ongoing war.



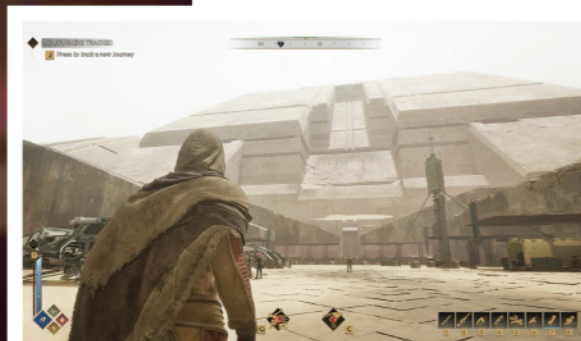
LEFT: Fit your thopter with a scanner to find buried loot.



Desert control points can be captured to win voting influence.



Snorting spice gives you powers
– and powerful hallucinations.

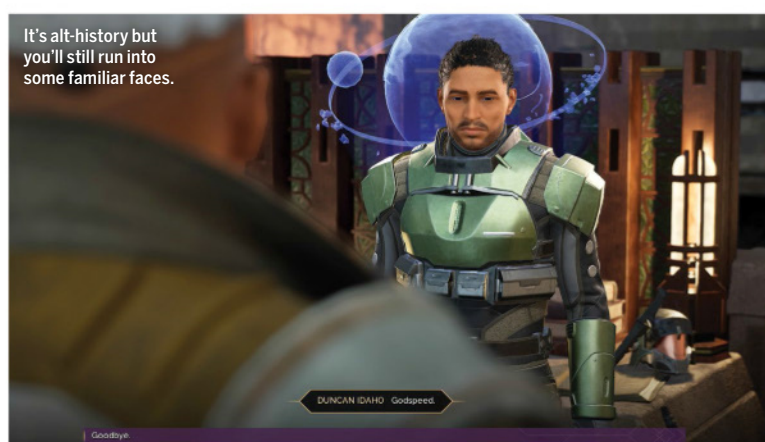


RIGHT: Thar she blows! Be quick to harvest spice before other players do.

BELOW: Wanna mine resources in real numbers? Build a big buggy.



It's alt-history but you'll still run into some familiar faces.



the angry sandworms that show up every few minutes. When the survival systems don't solely rely on killing the same NPCs over and over, there's an enjoyable routine that emerges, which includes patching up degraded gear and spot-welding vehicles to repair their components. These rituals make me feel less like a murderer and more like someone trying to carve out a life on an inhospitable planet.

WHATCHA DUNE?

Progression doesn't just lead to better weapons and gear but the feeling that you're becoming more a part of the Dune universe, and I get a little buzz every time I advance enough to craft something from the fiction.

Remember in Villeneuve's first Dune movie when Duke Leto gets shot? He's got his shield on which protects him fast-moving blades and projectiles, but the dart slowly burrows through Leto's shield until it incapacitates him. I've got a gun that does that now, called a drillshot, and it's sick.

The effect even looks the same as it does in the movie, with the hovering dart turning the blue shield red as it burrows through to find the vulnerable body of whatever unlucky NPC I've shot it at. We also have a few Fremen deathstills (seen in Dune: Part Two) at my guild's base that we can stick bodies in to convert them into water. Hunter-seeker drones, ornithopters, Holtzman shields, chrysknives: even as a casual Dune fan it's hard not to get excited when creating and using such iconic technology.

The world is genuinely impressive for its incredible verticality – in both directions. There are towering cliffs and spires between the dunes, and a ravine that stretches across an entire region that's so deep I thought at first it must just be a bottomless void that you're meant to avoid falling into. Nope. There's a bottom to it, but it's so far down you can't even see it.

Getting around the map is a blast, too, because you can climb anything, at least as long as your stamina holds out. Throw in a grappling hook and suspensors, and you can yoink yourself upwards and then continue rocketing skyward, all part of a travel system that shows Funcom wanted

its world to be a playground, not a chore, to traverse across.

GAME OVER, MAN!

The most controversial part of *Dune: Awakening* (if the sheer number of Reddit posts are to be believed) is the endgame. First is the Landsraad, a vague attempt at a political

framework that's part resource-collection and crafting chores, part PvP, and weirdly, part bingo card. It's realised with a 5x5 grid of tasks that refresh each week, which if completed by players of one faction

locks out the players of the other and lets the winner vote on the enactment of a new weekly server setting, like access to unique vendors or reduced crafting costs.

To win the weekly Landsraad, one faction must make a bingo by completing a line of five tasks (up, down, or diagonally), so there's some strategy involved in not just trying to complete your own row but block your opponents.

Hot take: I dig it. One afternoon as some Landsraad tasks appeared, my guild leader and I scurried around to fulfil them. One task was to deliver gems which are only found in buried caches, so we each mounted scanners on our thopter and barrelled out over the desert to dig them up while dodging sandworms and patches of quicksand. We later mass-produced a

The world is genuinely impressive for its incredible verticality

bunch of knives for another task and raced out to kill members of an NPC faction for another. Dashing around to complete these milestones is grindy but fun, and it feels pretty satisfying to see a task completed knowing you contributed.

The problem with the Landsraad is that if I hadn't logged in that day, or even during those particular few hours, I'd have missed all that fun. I like that just a couple of players working together can have an impact on the endgame in a relatively short amount of time, but it's less great that the winner of the political bingo match can be determined so quickly.

ORNERY THOPTER

I haven't done a ton of PvP in *Dune: Awakening*, and though I've lost all but a single fight I still mostly enjoy it. Compared with the brain-dead NPCs, it's exciting to see players using their skills and weapons unpredictably, even when they're using them to ruin my day.

But most of the PvP in the endgame zone is done with choppers and rockets – which feels like an odd design choice in a game where we spend nearly a hundred hours building up skills that have nothing to do with airborne combat. It can be brutal: I've been chased halfway across the map while being ruthlessly pummelled by missiles from another thopter, but I don't really hate it. I like the risk of making excursions into the PvP zone, same as how I like tempting fate with sandworms. This is Arrakis, after all. I don't expect to always make it out in one piece.

I've enjoyed nearly all of my time in *Dune: Awakening*. I like most of the survival grind, there's tons of Dune tech that feels really cool to craft and use even if you aren't up on 4,000 years' worth of Duncan Idaho lore, and I mostly dig the endgame systems, even though they're a bit oddly designed.

The best compliment I can bestow is that even after 100 hours, when I see a sandworm breach or I hear another player's thopter approaching, *Dune: Awakening* still makes my heart pound out of my chest. ■

SUIT UP!

What you wear on Arrakis could save your life

1 STILL SUIT
Recycles your wastewater (gross) but handy to sip on in the heat: like a canteen that slowly refills.

2 POWERED GEAR
Holtzman shields block ranged attacks and suspensors prevent fall damage: essential gear for combat and traversal.

3 SOFTSTEP BOOTS
It takes sandworms longer to hear you running around on the dunes. Trust me: you need these.



PC GAMER VERDICT

Dune: Awakening is an engrossing survival and crafting game with flawed but engaging endgame systems.

80

TAINTED LOVE

TAINTED GRAIL: THE FALL OF AVALON is a competent open-world, first-person RPG

By Sam Desatoff

There's a confidence in *Tainted Grail: The Fall of Avalon*. You can see it in the world design, feel it in the colourful cast of characters. 'Skyrim but you're also haunted by the ghost of King Arthur' is a concept that demands ambition. But developer Questline is an untested studio, and fumbling the ball was always going to be a strong possibility. I'm happy to report that we have a fascinating open-world first-person RPG experience on our hands.

It's not without blemishes, though. For every moment worth celebrating there's also a frustrating enemy encounter or a confusing UI feature to endure. The resulting game can be summed up in one word: inconsistent.

Tainted Grail is a dark fantasy take on Arthurian legend set in the same world as the popular board game; in fact, it came to be thanks to the success of the 2018 Kickstarter campaign for the tabletop game.

Being a first-person open-world RPG, *Tainted Grail* invites comparisons to genre mainstays like *The Elder Scrolls* and *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, and it unabashedly leans into those influences – it even opens with an *Oblivion*-style prison break.

You'll level up skills as you use them, rewarding whatever playstyle you happen to be rolling with at the time; I tended to favour a battlemage-style build with a magic spell in one hand and a sword in the other. Each cast grew my magic power, each swing made me stronger with one-handed weapons. I've always been a big fan of this system in the *Elder Scrolls* games, and it's used to good effect here.

WYRD WORLD

The world is also a lot of fun to explore. The realm of Avalon is divided into three different hub regions, each with their own storyline and biome. The environments are very pretty and loaded with points of interest to explore, like caves and abandoned villages. I found something useful – a new piece of

armour, a new crafting recipe – almost everywhere I looked.

During your journey, you'll make several forays into the Wyrdrealm, an alternate dimension populated

by spirits and otherworldly monsters. The design of this realm is filled with character, from huge statues of eldritch creatures to a skyline of crumbling towers.

For me, though, *Tainted Grail* shines

brightest with its characters. Every NPC has something worthwhile to contribute, and most of them offer sidequests that add new wrinkles to

Some more variety in enemy design would have been welcome

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An open-world first-person RPG that puts a unique spin on the legend of King Arthur

EXPECT TO PAY
£38

DEVELOPER
Questline

PUBLISHER
Awaken Realms

STEAM DECK
Verified

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 7600, 32 GB RAM, AMD Radeon RX 7800 XT

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
taintedgrail.com

the larger story. They can also be surprisingly funny: you'll help a nobleman fake his death to get out of a loveless marriage, uncover the lair of an undead chef chasing the next great meal, assist a woman who accidentally turned her husband into a pig, and more. That sense of humour extends to gear too.

There's a lot to like about *Tainted Grail*, but Questline's ambition runs ahead of its execution in myriad small ways: little quirks here and there that don't amount to much individually, but, taken together, lessen the immersion and lead to some frustration and monotony. For instance, Cuanacht, the name of the second region of the game, is pronounced at least four different ways by NPCs, and it makes the world feel less cohesive.

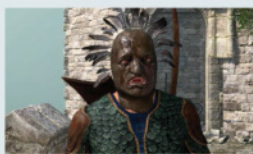
Some more variety in enemy design would have been welcome as well. You can only kill so many bandits with the same face before it becomes rote, and the liberal use of palette-swapped monsters makes the world of Avalon feel smaller than it is.

There are some design decisions that I'm not too keen on. Being limited to only four weapon loadouts was a bit disappointing, and having to menu my way back to the weapons screen got tedious every time I wanted to experiment with something new. There are a few frustrating difficulty spikes, too, and the dungeons can be disorienting without a minimap to help.

There's a lot to like about *Tainted Grail*, and the good outweighs the bad by a fair margin. In a genre dominated by Bethesda and Obsidian, it's good to see a new developer making its mark, and Questline is punching above its weight. ■

QUESTS WITH CHARACTER

Some of my favorite quest-giving NPCs



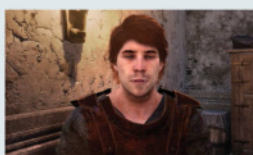
KEEPER GWYLAN

Keeper Gwylan is fighting a solo war against the seagulls of the Horns of the South.



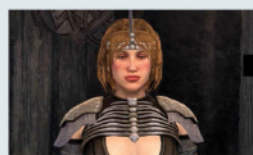
LEMUL

Hiding from a witch inside a barrel and refuses to come out until you've dealt with her.



ARDEN SHADOWBLADE

An author and amour enthusiast whose poor designs are risking the lives of his readers.



ALISA

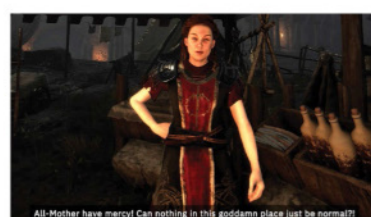
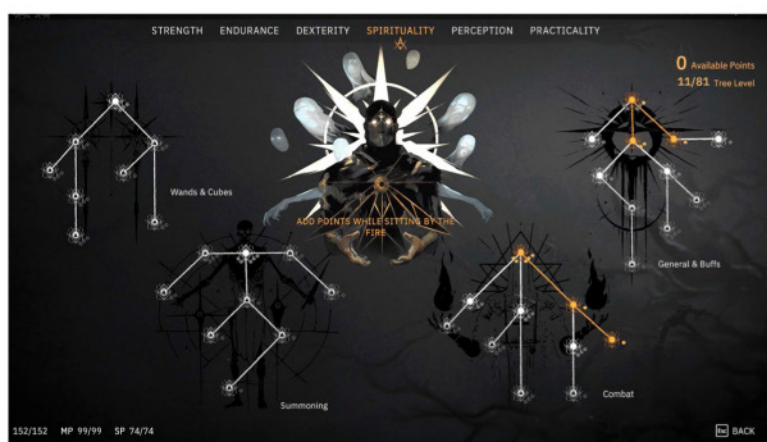
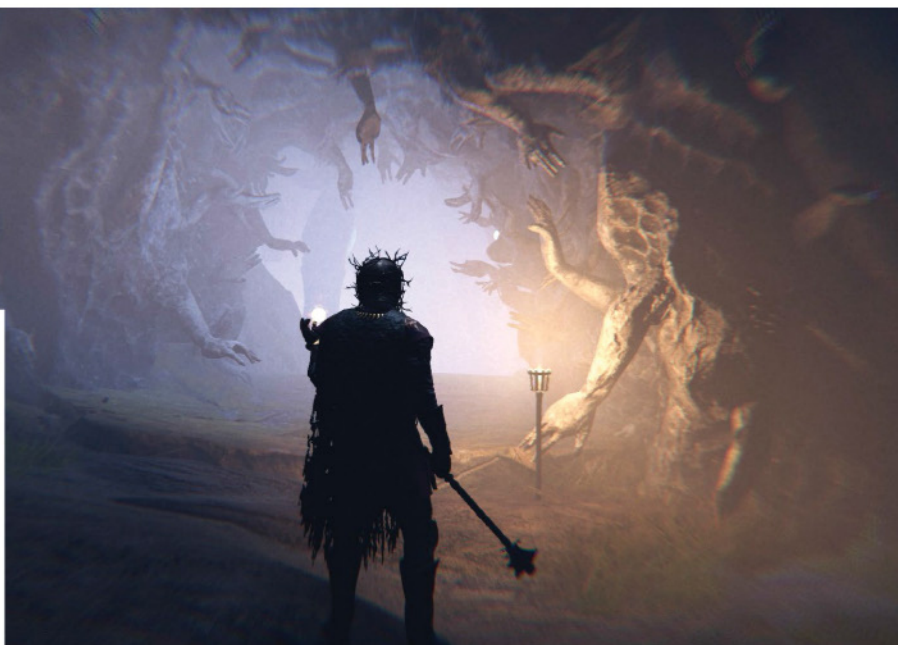
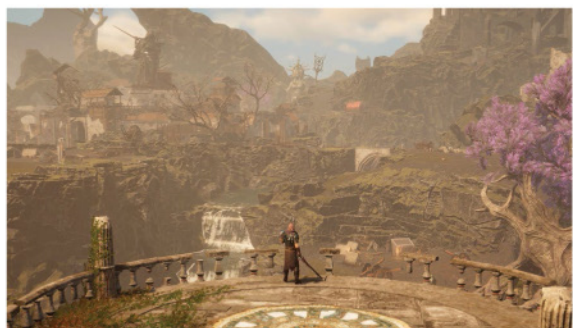
Alisa is a displaced noble whose loveless marriage leads her to a life of fashion design.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Puts an interesting spin on Arthurian legend and presents a world that plays like a love letter to the first-person RPG.

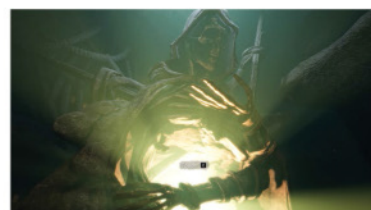
75

Sure, let's just go check out the spooky hands cave.



FAR LEFT: You want skill trees? We've got skill trees.

LEFT: The answer is no, nothing is normal in Avalon.



The world is lousy with ogres.

PORTALE ROYALE

SPLITGATE 2 doesn't make FPS great again

By Nova Smith

Splitgate 2's plan to "make FPS great again," as 1047 Games co-founder Ian Proulx's really cool hat put it, is undermined by gunplay that feels nearly identical to that of *Halo 5: Guardians* (hardly one of the greats) and movement that mimics *Apex Legends* (just OK). There is something comforting in *Splitgate 2*'s familiarity, though, and I easily fell back into old habits as I racked up multi-kills with the tastefully limited arsenal of grenades, abilities and melee attacks.

There is something comforting in *Splitgate 2*'s familiarity, and I was surprised by the ease with which I fell back into old, tenth-prestige habits, deftly comboing my Splitgater's tastefully limited arsenal of grenades, abilities and melee attacks, and racking up multi-kills, but its flagship feature falls flat, and the maps and guns lack character, making *Splitgate 2* fine as a free-to-play timewaster, but little more than that.

PORTAL PROBLEMS

What's supposed to really set *Splitgate 2* apart is its portals, which

work something like they do in Valve's famous puzzle games, but there's little reason to 'think with portals' during its 4v4 deathmatches given the laser-accurate gunplay and a swift time-to-kill.

In all modes, portals come off as a massive strategic and tactical liability

Even in the surprise battle royale mode, which was announced just before launch, I haven't found portals to be of any significant utility. When I did make use of them, it was always jumping through someone else's so I could beat them to death.

Across all of its modes, *Splitgate 2*'s portals come off as a massive strategic and tactical liability, because it's generally better to just focus on

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
F2P multiplayer FPS with portals

EXPECT TO PAY
Free (+ cosmetic bundles, battle pass)

DEVELOPER
1047 games

PUBLISHER
1047 games

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 5700G,
32GB RAM, AMD
Radeon RX 6600

STEAM DECK
Playable

LINK
splitgate.com

shooting your opponent than to distract yourself with on-the-fly spatial puzzle solving. With a quick time-to-kill and negligible recoil, good aim is generally the key to scoring a kill, not setting up portals to pull off manoeuvres that might not be tactically viable due to the ever-changing flow of combat.

TRICKSHOTS

The trickshots shown off in the trailer are definitely possible, but in my experience, can and will often be thwarted mid-manoeuve by an opponent who knows that once you make contact with the enemy, you should try and kill them rather than stunt on them.

There's occasional utility in using portals to 'peek' around corners, or to recover lost ground from falling from the top of a map, but with such a limited number of portal-able surfaces it's a feature I rarely engaged with. All of my best performances (including one where I went on a 15-strong killstreak), occurred when I flat out disregarded placing portals and focused on the gunplay.

I don't doubt that there's a lot of tactical potential for portal use at the highest level of *Splitgate*, but I can count on one hand the number of times I could bend the system to my own benefit, and across a dozen hours I never encountered anyone who was able to outsmart my bullets.

CLASS CLOWN

One area where *Splitgate* significantly deviates from its arena FPS heritage is its class system: there are three classes, each with special abilities in the form of wallhacks, shield walls and speed boosts.

Each class also has its own arsenal, weapons that fit into the archetype of assault rifle, submachine gun, carbine and shotgun. The difference between these weapons is marginal, resulting in a gun selection that feels needlessly

THINKING WITH PORTALS

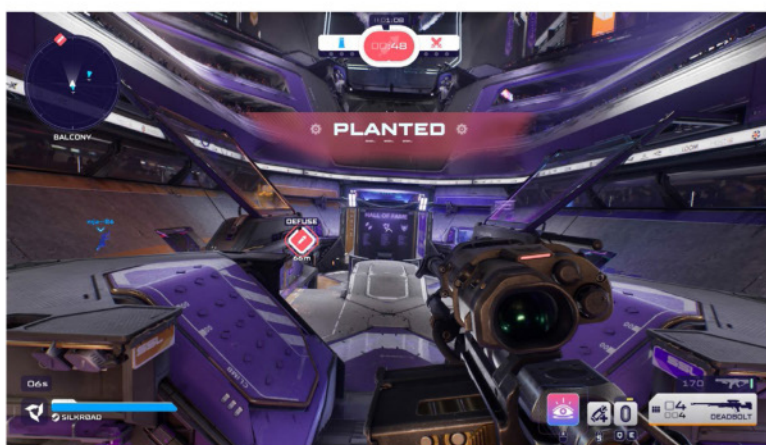
Application of portal technology may be underused, but it's got some potential



1 FLANKING
Placing portals in such a way so as to get the drop on the enemy is the definitive advantage in *Splitgate 2*.

2 SHORTCUTS
More relevant in objective modes like Splitball or Defuse, portals can be used to cut down on run time to and from enemy capture sites.

3 PEAKING
Even though it's not very efficient, nailing a high-powered headshot through a portal feels insanely good.

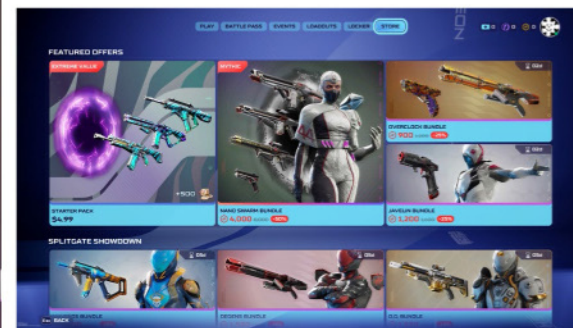


ABOVE: It's almost always better to prioritise shooting over placing portals.

FAR LEFT: The surfaces you can attach portals to are limited, or as seen here, totally absent.

BELOW: The boost to shields in *Splitgate 2*'s battle royale gives the gunplay more of a tactical edge.





FAR RIGHT: The battle royale map is an uninspired patchwork of *Splitgate 2*'s equally uninspired arena maps.

BELOW: It was all worth it to meet the real Tony Soprano.



crowded. When factoring in the power weapon spawns, an average match of *Splitgate 2* can have four types of shotguns floating around – three of which feel bad to use.

The maps aren't especially inspiring, either. I often struggled to find places to put my portals at all, with most of the taggable surfaces blending into the blobby, Wipeout-inspired architecture.

Design-wise, *Splitgate 2*'s maps are most similar to *Halo*'s, with sandwiching tiers of narrow basement halls complementing wide-open plazas with jump pads to give some access to skyways. There's a clean, neat symmetry to everything, making every map feel balanced, ripe for competitive play.

DEVOID OF CHARACTER

Unlike *Halo*, however, *Splitgate 2*'s maps are devoid of character, often resembling an ungainly retooling of the old Designers Republic aesthetic for a modern FPS, neo-Y2K colour palettes of pinks and blues festooned over characterless brutalist outcroppings. Many of the larger maps feel eerily soulless as disparate elements of futuristic sports arenas are mashed up with gravel quarries. *Halo*'s timeless map design, on the other hand, felt inspired: From *Halo 3*'s war-torn African brutalism to *Reach*'s drab Eastern-European agricolonies – even the long abandoned Forerunner battlefields felt eerily lived in. In *Splitgate 2*, every single map is like if your home

city's mega-arena was actually half built on the remnants of a strip mining operation.

BATTLE PASSÉ

I wouldn't be so harsh on the aesthetic were *Splitgate*'s monetisation not so garish. Upon launching the free-to-play game,

I was greeted with two tiers of season pass, three separate currencies and a cosmetic store populated by bundles that cost as much as a copy of *Helldivers 2*. I've bought more than a few cosmetic items in

my day (mostly in *War Thunder*), and sure, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but \$40 for what's on offer here is laughable. There's an obligatory Battle Pass as well, but with tickets tied to the completion of daily and weekly challenges, rewards are dispensed at a trickle.

If you felt the battle royale genre was long in the tooth before, you will be begging for a root canal as *Splitgate 2*'s take on the format is a brutal case of 'we have *Apex Legends* at home' (there's even a brazen 1:1 clone of *Titanfall*/*Apex*'s Kraeber anti-material rifle). Its map is an unimpressive patchwork quilt of the already bland arena maps, devoid of the character, meaning, or visual interest offered by other battle royales.

Dropping into the futuristic slurry is clunky, unintuitive, and there's little in the way of clear visual indicators for where the high-risk/high-reward areas are. All my matches began with

an awkward round of 'pass the baton' to see who would take the roll of jumpmaster, before someone inevitably set us down in another indistinct neon quarry populated by the same middling loot.

One area where the battle royale mode does shine is in gunfights, due to the heightened time-to-kill afforded by disposable shields. With more health to chew through, you're forced to approach shootouts more tactically, engaging more with your ability set and focusing fire with your team. Looting, however, totally flatlines the inertia of a great firefight, and in the lulls between skirmishes I was begging for the next shootout, enough that I found myself not caring if we won or lost the match overall.

Between being just generally tedious, *Splitgate 2*'s bland arsenal lacks in distinction. It's not like *PUBG*, where the choice between looting, say, a heavily modded AK-47 or a scoped rifle is meaningful in that it dictates how you approach the map and environment. *Splitgate 2*'s arsenal drowns you in near-identical carbines and assault rifles, only occasionally providing a power weapon worth getting into a scrap over.

BOLD MARKETING DRIVE

Ultimately, all I came away from with *Splitgate 2*'s battle royale mode wishing that the higher time-to-kill would carry over to its arena mode.

In spite of a bold marketing drive to assert *Splitgate 2* as a return to FPS greatness, there's very little on offer here that hasn't been done before. *Splitgate 2* plays like *Halo 5* (and sometimes *Apex Legends*) with portals, a mechanic that should be transformative but is rarely relevant.

Ultimately, I echo the sentiment of 1047 co-founder Ian Proulx's hat – if you crave a return to what Proulx posits as the golden age of FPS, your time is better spent on *Titanfall 2*'s community run Northstar client, your favourite *Battlefield 24/7* conquest server, or any other last-gen shooter that actually respects your time and your money. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A fine F2P time-waster, but its portals don't add much to the genre and its shooting is nothing special.

60

One area where the battle royale mode does shine is in gunfights

NOT QUITE BEST IN CLASS

Splitgate 2's class system feels superfluous



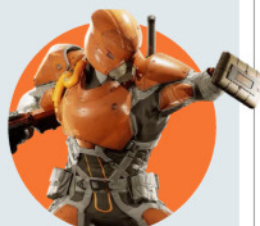
AEROS

Emphasising agility, the Aeros does everything just a little bit faster – though not enough to feel meaningfully different.



MERIDIAN

Spawning with marginally better starting weapons than the other classes, Meridian always feels like the safe pick.



SABRASK

These enforcers have a little bit more health and do a little more damage, and can throw down a cover emplacement.

SEXYRO

STELLAR BLADE leans on its inspiration a little too much

By Mollie Taylor

Stellar Blade's opening hours are so mired by atrocious level design that I can only assume people are willingly ploughing through for the sake of seeing protagonist Eve's bum jiggle around in a skin-tight suit for a bit longer. Do I blame them? No, but it's a tough start before things start getting good. Even after 30 hours I still can't shake the feeling that it was trying a little too hard to be *Nier: Automata* on horny steroids.

Its plot is almost identical: a war-torn Earth, now populated by monstrous alien lifeforms. A woman fighting to reclaim the planet and save humanity alongside a drone companion, soundtracked by eerie female vocals.

Do the world or its characters ever acknowledge this? No. It's a bizarre juxtaposition in a game that so heavily sexualises Eve, despite being a sexless

personality existing in a sexless universe. In fact, Eve has very little personality at all. The same is true of supporting cast Adam and Lily.

Worldbuilding is *Stellar Blade*'s weakest point. It doesn't help that it's so close to both *Nier* games that I couldn't help but compare.

Where *Stellar Blade* does differ from its inspiration, however, is the combat. I went in expecting a hack-and-slash only to discover something a little more in between *Sekiro* and *Devil May Cry*. Enemies sport a variety of attack patterns, which Eve can dodge or parry. A perfect parry sends sparks flying, accompanied by an incredibly satisfying ching sound. A perfect dodge sees time slow down as Eve acrobatically flips around.

Things open up further once Eve gets hold of her skill tree abilities and gear to compliment certain playstyles. I was able to make my dodge and parry windows a little more lenient and pump a bunch of gear into improving my Beta skills – powerful abilities that require building up a meter through attacking and blocking.

Stellar Blade's combat hardly reinvents the wheel, but it was satisfying once things started flowing. It's one of the game's stronger points, and getting to grips with its systems is one of the main things that kept me pushing through some of its sloggier levels.

PAINT THE WAY

Stellar Blade's level design is a bit all over the place. It rears its ugly head the most in

the game's tutorial level, Eidos 7. I'm usually a yellow paint apologist, but it's so abhorrent here that I was shocked that I not only noticed it, but

Things open up further once Eve gets hold of her skill tree abilities

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A salacious Soulslike about saving humanity and reclaiming a war-torn Earth

EXPECT TO PAY
£60

DEVELOPER
Shift Up Corporation

PUBLISHER
PlayStation Publishing

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 9 3900XT, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3070

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
stellar-blade.com

was bothered by it. Everything gets yellow paint: secret paths, bridges, ledges. It highlights how poorly Eidos 7 flows, and a B&Q Warehouse-worth of paint cans did not prevent me from getting lost or directionally twisted. It does improve once I'm unleashed into large areas like the Wasteland and the Great Desert, or herded into more linear levels like Abyss Levoire.

Smaller levels were where I enjoyed *Stellar Blade* the most. Tightly-designed with nuggets of worldbuilding and some special ways of tackling combat – like only being able to use ranged weapons – were my personal highlight, and I'm looking forward to going through them again in an NG+ playthrough.

Despite my overall 'it's fine' attitude, I did enjoy *Stellar Blade* and will run it back to pick up all the things I missed the first time. The game has tons of costumes, which is my biggest videogame weakness. There are even accessories and hairstyles, and if there's one thing I do love, it's playing dress-up with fictional characters.

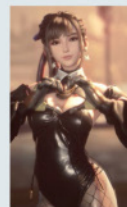
The game also runs amazingly, and while *Stellar Blade* may be the best PC port I've ever played, it looks and runs great with minimal frame dips. I even played through the final stretch on my Steam Deck, and was even more surprised to discover how well it ran on a handheld. There was far less crusty graphics tradeoff than I was expecting, and I imagine I'll be doing much of my NG+ playthrough portably as a result.

Does *Stellar Blade* do anything groundbreaking? No, but it's still fun. If you can look beyond a middling story and a painful tutorial level, you'll find a solid Soulslike lurking underneath. Also, a lot of latex. ■

A H-EVE-ING CLOSET

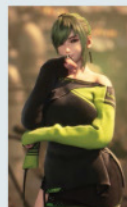
Eve's got more clothes than a Shein factory

CYBER BUNNY



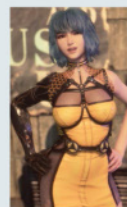
Is your protagonist really sexy if they don't have a bunny suit to parade around in? I say no.

DAILY MASCOT



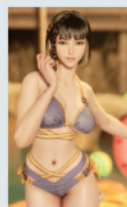
Nothing like saving humanity in the same baggy jumper I use to clean my toilet.

CYBERNETIC SUIT



I call this one the Maya Borderlands. Or the Joy Inside Out. Or the Coraline Coraline.

BLUE MONSOON



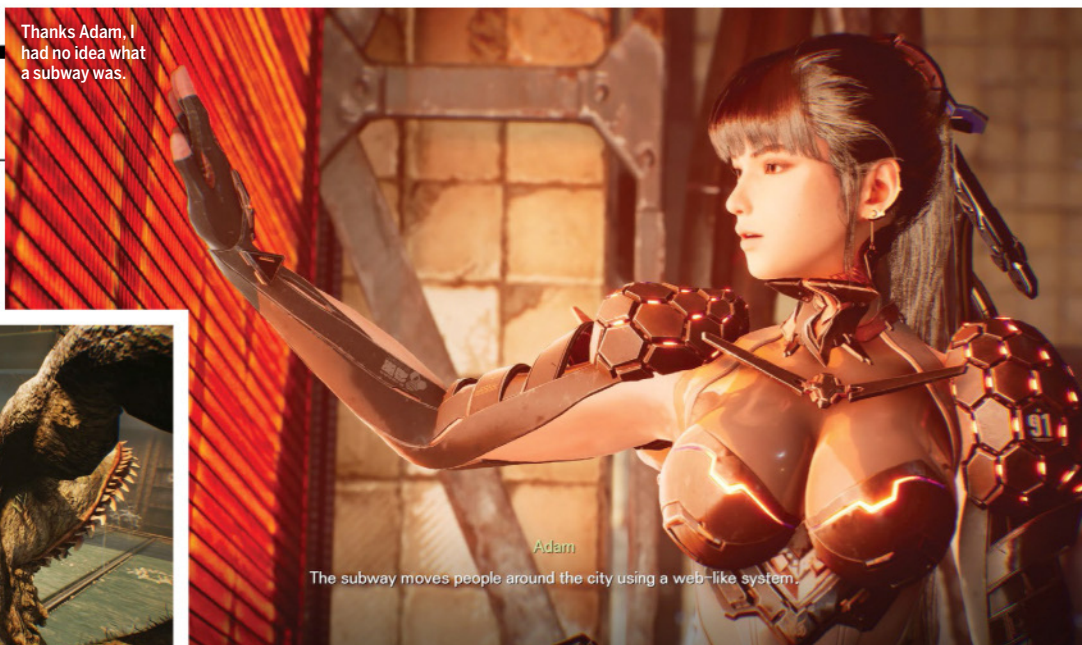
What, you thought this game wouldn't have a bikini? Of course it does, don't be daft.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Exciting combat and a plethora of sexy costumes can't totally save *Stellar Blade*'s meh story and levels.

68

Thanks Adam, I had no idea what a subway was.

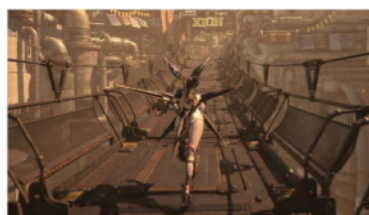


Adam

The subway moves people around the city using a web-like system.

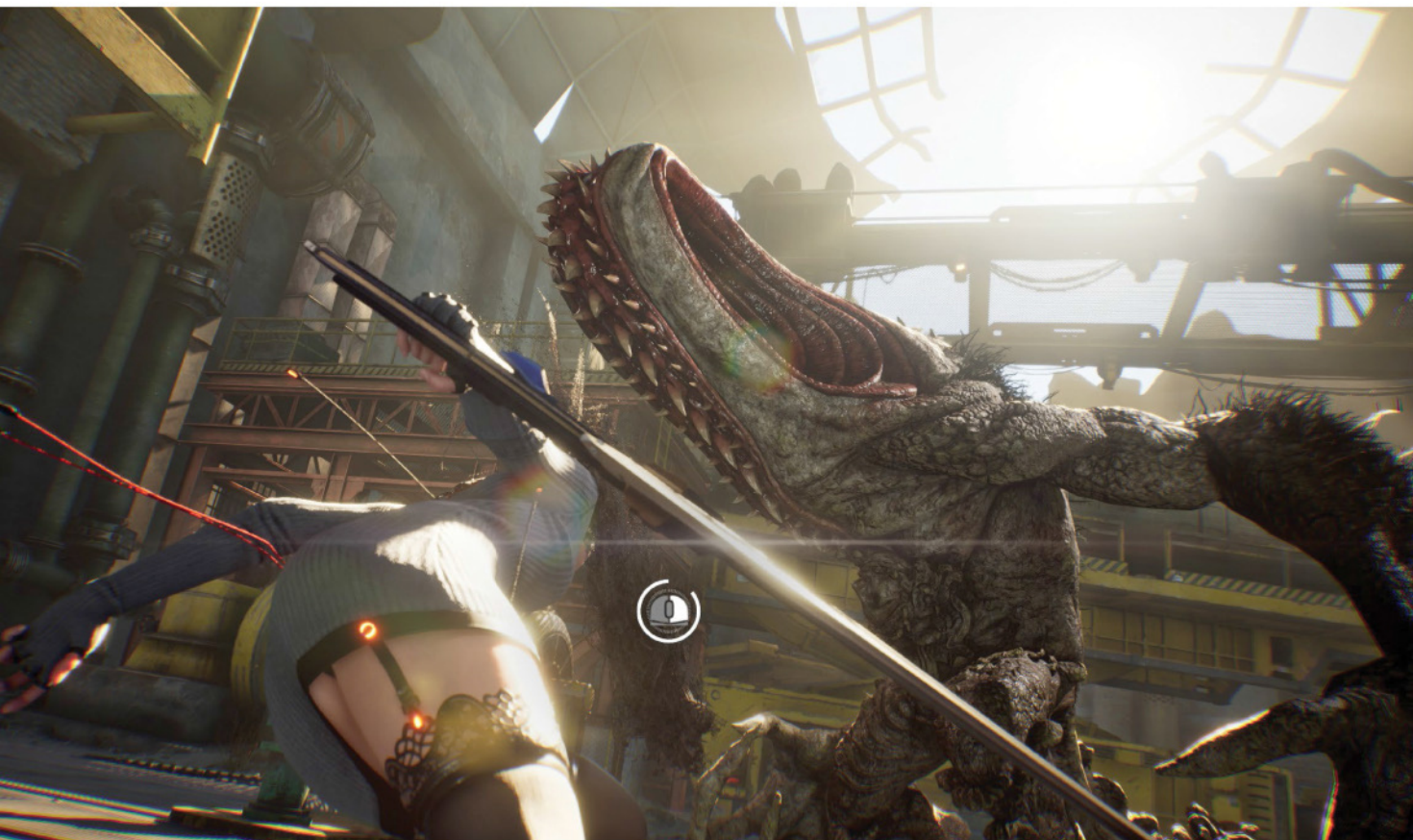
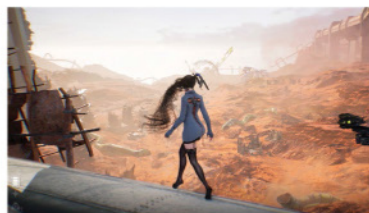


Name a more iconic trio (there are many).



LEFT: You'll be seeing a lot of Xion.

BELOW: QTEs rear their ugly head occasionally, but not too often.



UNCONTROLLED

FBC: FIREBREAK is a big old mess. Mainly by design, but partly by mistake

By Rick Lane

FBC: Firebreak is one of the messiest games I've ever played, but this is in large part because it is a game about mess. Creating it, cleaning it up, getting caked up to your neck in it – your character is constantly covered in water or sticky notes or quivering pink goo that could've sluiced straight out of a British gameshow in the '90s. If Noel Edmonds ever made a first-person shooter, it would probably look like *Firebreak*.

But *Firebreak* is also deliberately messy on a mechanical level. It's all about figuring out how things work through trial and (often fatal) error, a game of bungling your way through crowds of enemies hoping you don't accidentally fry or torch or explode your friends in the process.

For those unaware, *FBC: Firebreak* is a cooperative spinoff of Remedy's excellent 2019 action game *Control*. It's still set in The Oldest House, a foreboding, brutalist interdimensional nexus that serves as the headquarters of the Federal Bureau of Control – essentially the FBI for weird shit.

Instead of playing as the director of the FBC, empowered with anomalous magic in slick third-

person combat, you play as the FBC's Firebreakers, disposable janitors clad in rubber suits and acoustic foam panel armour tasked with fixing The Oldest House's reality-defying

maintenance issues.

Between you and your objective stands an army of the FBC's own employees, possessed and contorted by a force called the Hiss.

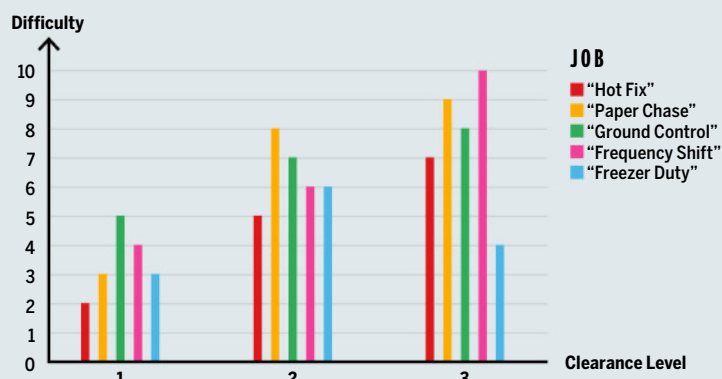
Firebreak doesn't really explain any of this. It assumes you're

familiar with *Control* and doesn't have much in the way of a tutorial, cramming a hasty explanation into a loading-screen letter which in the age of SSDs you won't have time to read. If you're coming to *Firebreak* without having played *Control* (like my poor, long-suffering partner) prepare to be tremendously confused.

Elements like fire, water, and electricity all play a role in combat

BALANCING ACT

How clearance level affects the difficulty of each job



NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A daft cooperative shooter in which you fix the world's weirdest maintenance issues against hordes of possessed enemies

EXPECT TO PAY
£33

DEVELOPER
Remedy Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Remedy Entertainment

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 3600,
32 GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce 2080 Super

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
playfirebreak.com

FIXER UPPER

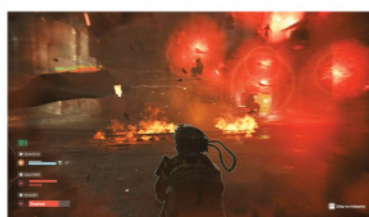
Structurally, *Firebreak* takes the form of five specific jobs, linear-ish levels where you must fight through the Hiss to complete a sequence of specific objectives. These range from the merely strange, like fixing The Oldest House's air conditioning to stop its incandescently angry furnace from burning the place down; to the downright ridiculous, like clearing a vast infestation of pink goo off the building's electricity turbines, blasting them with your guns in great showers of cosmic blanchmange.

More than anything else, it's the ideas that drive each of these jobs that make *Firebreak* stand out. For starters, they're bizarre, but many of them also come bundled with mission-specific mechanics. Paper Chase, arguably the most distinctive of the bunch, sees you sweeping up an enormous carpet of sticky notes. But if you run across the carpet, or get attacked by sticky-note creatures called shufflers, you'll begin to get covered in sticky notes yourself. These amass on the screen, obscuring your vision until you disintegrate into a pile of paper.

I will say not every job is a winner, though. The fifth job involves tossing flame-spewing heaters into juddering ice anomalies. The theme of the job is neat, taking you beyond The Oldest House's brutalist architecture into a cardboard cutout skiing resort complete with a functioning ski-lift. But the anomalies aren't all that interesting, the heaters are fiddly to move and activate, and the whole thing's a bit of an anticlimax.

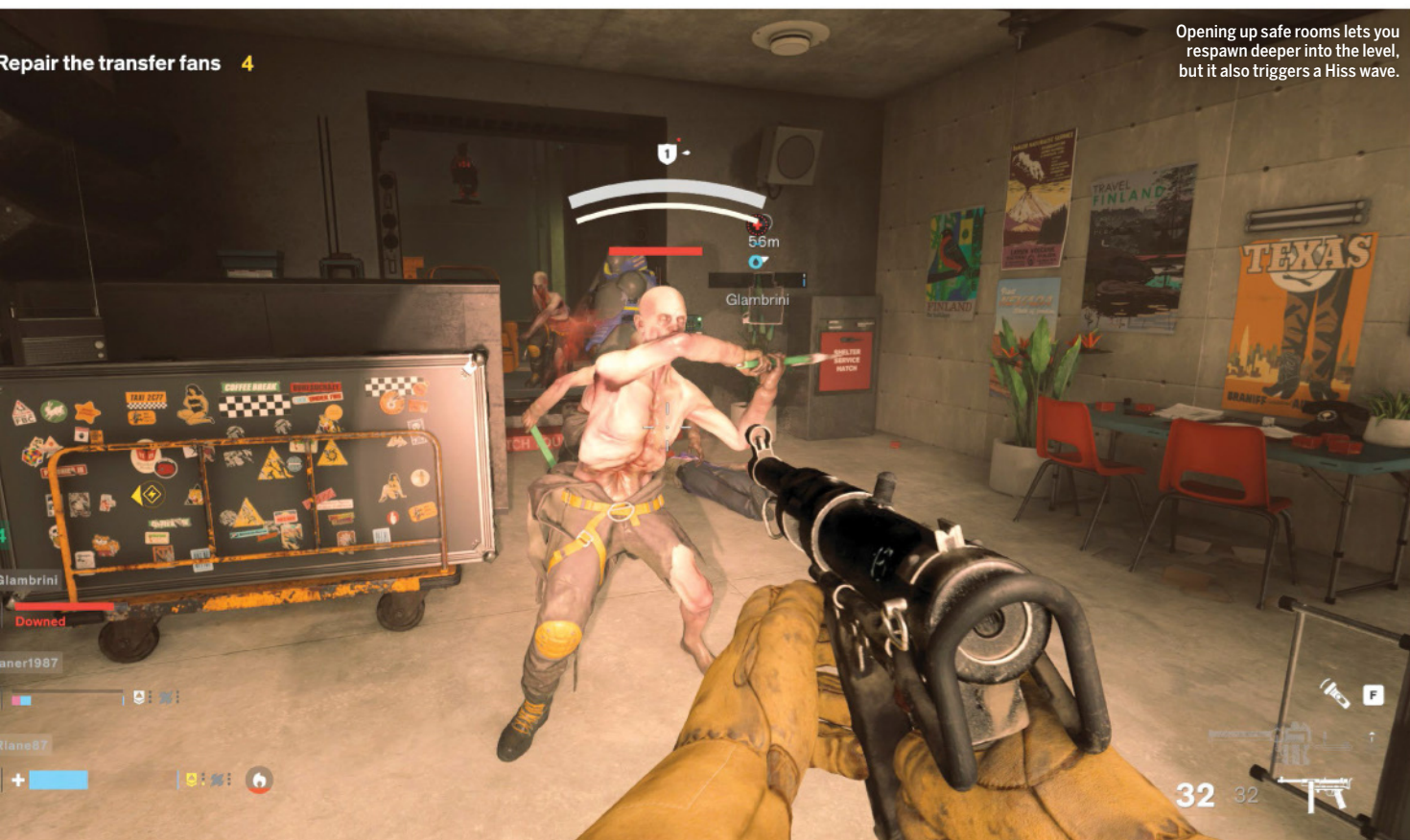
Still, for the most part, I like the jobs conceptually. *Firebreak* folds these mission-specific mechanics into a more general emphasis on systemic interaction. Elements like fire, water, and electricity all play a role in *Firebreak*'s combat, and you can outfit your team with various equipment known as kits to exploit them. The splash kit furnishes the player with a crank-powered super-soaker that





FAR LEFT: *Firebreak* makes good use of *The Oldest House*'s various locations.

LEFT: Like *Control*, *Firebreak*'s visual style is tremendous.



Opening up safe rooms lets you respawn deeper into the level, but it also triggers a Hiss wave.

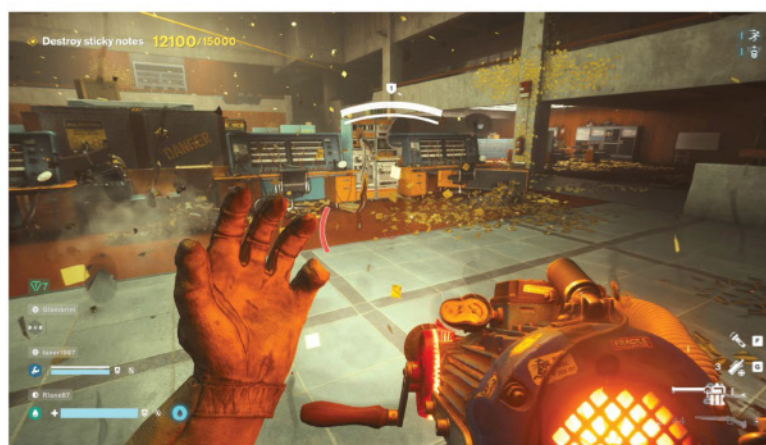
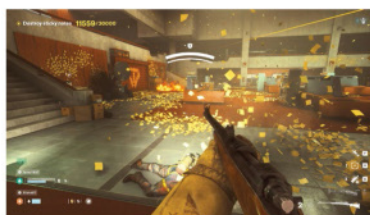


The pink goo is incredibly silly, right up until the point it isn't.



RIGHT: Get covered by too many sticky notes, and you're dead.

FAR RIGHT: Weapons vary in quality, but the hunting rifle and heavy machinegun are both excellent.



splashes the environment and enemies in water. The Hiss take more damage from bullets when wet, but this also makes them vulnerable to electrical attacks. So if another player wields the jump kit, they can zap entire groups of soggy enemies, stunning them.

Since discovery is a big part of *Firebreak*, I don't want to delve too deeply into how all the different ideas interplay. But I will say there is a decent amount to discover relative to the game's scope.

SOFT COMBAT

I am less convinced by *Firebreak* as a straight shooter, however. Combat has a slower, softer feel than *Control's* clinical, highly kinetic firefights. This is partly by design – you're a goofball wielding a gun rather than an accidental superhero. But the net result is that the Hiss are less fun to fight overall. Fighting those floating chair lads was a blast when you could lob a massive lump of concrete at them. But they're annoying when trying to pick them out of the air.

The quality of the combat also depends heavily on which weapon you use. The grease gun-looking SMG, which is kinda the default weapon, is absolutely awful. But the sawn-off shotgun is pretty tasty, and the revolver isn't bad either. The best weapon, though, is the hunting rifle which compensates for an agonisingly slow reload time with a wicked lethality when you land a headshot. Still, if it's raw cooperative combat you're after, I would much sooner recommend *Helldivers 2* or *Darktide*, which boast a level of refinement *Firebreak* doesn't match.

Nonetheless, the surrounding ideas compensate for the weaker combat, and when all its elements are in equilibrium, *Firebreak's* a pretty good time. But there were extended periods playing *Firebreak* when I didn't enjoy it at all, because it has some of the wildest balance swings I've encountered for a long time.

The reason for this is a little tricky to explain. *Firebreak* has multiple difficulty levels, with the baseline for this review being 'normal'. But levels are also partitioned into three different areas in a system known as 'clearance', which you unlock by playing through rounds in the

previous areas first, playing a smaller chunk of the level before running back to the exit elevator.

These areas also increase sequentially in challenge, regardless of what difficulty you play on. But these difficulty hikes are highly inconsistent. Generally speaking, the first area of every level is almost laughably easy on standard difficulty. The second area, by comparison, ranges from reasonably challenging to virtually impossible depending on which area you're playing.

The most dramatic spike occurs in Paper Chase, which goes from a leisurely cleanup operation to backing you into a corner against an unceasing torrent of Hiss the moment you open the door to the second area. The shufflers are part of the problem, because they can kill you far too quickly, and also drop more sticky notes when they die (unless you wet them first) But the real issue is that enemies simply don't stop coming, resulting in a grinding, attritional stalemate.

CLEARANCE LEVEL 3

As for Clearance level 3, again, the difficulty is all over the place. The climactic encounter against the furnace in Hot Fix is perfectly

judged. But the finale of Frequency Shift (the pink goo level) is not just hard, it's downright broken. See, the pink goo regrows at a faster rate as you progress through each area, obscuring more of the level as it goes on. This is a cool idea, and I love how the mood of the goo shifts from absurd to surprisingly menacing. Yet once we reached the finale, it began regrowing almost instantaneously, completely blocking passages in a way that made it incredibly difficult to bypass.

FIXER UPPER

In short, *Firebreak* needs a considerable tune-up to make that escalation more organic and gradual, and ensure the game better knows when to take the foot off the gas. But the clearance system also creates another issue, ironically one it seems designed to solve. See, *Firebreak's* jobs are small, even compared to adjacent games like *Left4Dead* and *Darktide*. Played right through, they might take half an hour to see end to end. Since Clearance requires you to play through chunks of the level multiple times, though, overall it takes longer to reach that climactic encounter.

The intent, at least as far as I can see, is to give the jobs greater replay value. But it ultimately ends up giving them less. See, while *Darktide* also had a slender mission roster at launch, I played each of those missions three, maybe four times in full before I began to grow weary of them. By the time you reach the end of a *Firebreak* mission, however, you've already seen the bulk of it at least twice. So once I'd finished a job, I was kind of done with it, even though I'd spent less time in it than if it was a straight run to the finish line.

The good news is that many of *Firebreak's* problems are fixable. A thorough balance revision would immediately improve the experience. The clearance problem is harder to solve, but the addition of new levels (which are coming later in the year) will certainly help. In time, I see *Firebreak* becoming a perfectly decent cooperative shooter. For now, it isn't quite a job well done. ■

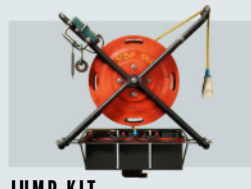
KIT LIST

Here's how *Firebreak's* Crisis Kits work



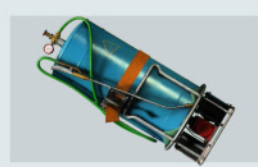
FIX KIT

Gives you a big wrench to repair devices and swing at enemies. Also lets you build a cannon.



JUMP KIT

Lets you shock enemies, but shooting it at the floor will also propel you into the air.



SPLASH KIT

A support tool all about making things wet, which increases damage dealt to enemies.



MEAL KIT

Not featured in the game, but great for children and journalists on deadline.

PC GAMER VERDICT

FBC: Firebreak's madcap mission conceits are delightfully silly, but limited replay value hinders the fun.

60

PITCH PERFECT

A few kinks aside, **REMATCH** is pitch perfect

By Justin Wagner

There's a lot going on in a 5v5 game of virtual football, but the thing I have to keep reminding myself to do is breathe. It's easy to forget when you're playing goalie a minute-and-a-half into extra time and three opponents are trading the ball in front of your net as they gear up for shot, but you'll need a lungful of air so you can rejoice or curse in a way the neighbours can hear when you make or don't make the big save.

I've rarely thought of a sports game as immersive, but here I can practically feel the turf whizzing by as I kick it up. That's because *Rematch* – aka *Rocket League* with feet instead of wheels – is as intense an arcade sports game as I've played in a long time, nailing that tightrope walk between depth and immediacy I associate with sports game greats like *Super Mega Baseball* and *Daytona USA*. It's an arcadey, stylised take on footy that trims fat like foul play and penalty cards to home in on the core of dribbling, shooting, passing, and intercepts.

The standout feature is that each player controls a single team member in third-person, trading roles like goalkeeper and striker.

Despite the lack of fist fights, *Sifu* developer Slocap's take on the biggest sport in the world doesn't feel like a left turn. Instead, it feels like a culmination of past games' successes. Sure, you're pushing a ball around instead of kicking teeth in, but

Rematch is a hard-fought wellspring of adrenaline on par with any blockbuster beat 'em up.

Shots will rarely go in the goal without some misdirection

GOING PRO

You're not the main character. Competitive games tend to offer

a decent trick of the light, though: going 20-0 as a safelane carry in *Dota* or obliterating half the lobby in *Fortnite* will stoke even the merest of smouldering egos. *Rematch* stamps out such flights of fancy beneath a fresh pair of cleats.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A 5v5 competitive football game from the team behind *Sifu*

EXPECT TO PAY
£21

DEVELOPER
Slocap

PUBLISHER
Slocap, Kepler Interactive

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-12700F,
16 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3060 Ti

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
playrematch.com

Shots will rarely go in the goal without some misdirection, ball hogs are always vulnerable to coordinated steals, and any one-sided stomps are called off with a swift mercy rule. It's a PvP game, sure, but I like to think of it as a contest of co-op; a stack of excellent, selfish players will rarely beat out a competent, organised team. Whenever I put a point on the board, it was a rush – but I could never take sole credit.

In the heat of a game, this means constantly surveying the field for open teammates to lob a pass at and open opponents to mark or tackle. There's a smorgasbord of context-sensitive inputs to mind at any given moment: with the ball, you can send a grounded pass in any direction, lob it just the same, rainbow flick the ball over your own head, assume a defensive stance, and so on.

There's a similar menu of choices when playing goalie or roaming without the ball, and what results is a delicious hotbed of head games where intuition is just as critical as aim and execution. A lot of games promise action that's 'easy to learn, hard to master', but *Rematch* absolutely has the goods.



TOP: I always knew *Rocket League* was missing something: shoes.





TOP: Cheeky angles and a quick distraction will net you more than a few points.

FAR RIGHT: Defo getting David Ginola vibes from this guy.

That said, the overall package could use some building out and a bit of polish. Bugs and server desync are all over this game, at least for now. While the most pressing issues have been dealt with, I still find that a goalie might catch the ball only for it to teleport into the net moments later. These issues are uncommon enough that I don't consider them a grave blemish, but they can still undercut the integrity of everything at crucial, match-defining moments.

Aside from that, though, slick presentation and a fine sense of control furnish *Rematch* with a timeless quality. Where other sports videogames tailor their lineups to the latest rosters, laboriously recreate the broadcast spectacle, and plaster their boxes with licensed likenesses, *Rematch* is more enamoured with the strategies and skill sets that make football tick than with football as a fixture of pop culture.

With a nearly pick-up-and-play setup that could suck anyone into a 'one more game' loop, regardless of their footie familiarity. It's hard to imagine not getting swept up in the hype, whether you've seen so much as a single game. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Rematch is a heart-pumping genre superlative that should not be missed despite some technical issues.

86



RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

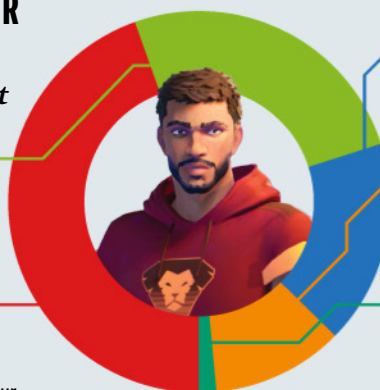
Back of the net

26% GOALIE GUMPTION

Ah crap, I'm in the goalie box.

44% POTENT PASSES

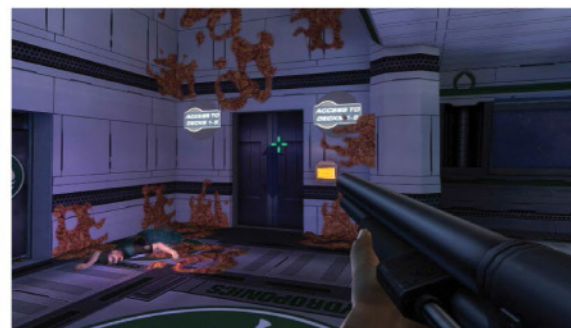
You won't get far without occasionally trusting the ball to your siblings-in-arms.



17% MINDGAMES
I hit the wrong button and did a lob, d'oh!

11% STEADY SHOTS
I always drain that effort meter for added power when hitting the ball.

2% PING POWER
Be sure to warm up those pingin' fingers before a match.



RIGHT: One of the coolest openings to any RPG.

BELOW: Ball is life.



One of my favourite rooms on the ship.



DATA WORM

The **SYSTEM SHOCK 2 REMASTER** makes a classic more approachable

By Ted Litchfield

There's a hubris to reviewing a unanimous classic decades after the fact – this mostly applies to guys on YouTube not named Mandalore. Yeah buddy, sure, you've got something to say about *Earthbound* that nobody cottoned on to before. Thank God, then, that I'm not charged with reviewing the 1999 classic *System Shock 2*. I'm only reviewing *System Shock 2*'s long-awaited remaster from the specialists at Nightdive.

This is the way you should play *System Shock 2* now. You could approximate the remaster with a constellation of mods and quality of life fixes, but Nightdive's *System Shock 2* removes the headache, offering a well-curated suite of changes and upgrades.

One thing you can't get in any mod is the remaster's redone cutscenes. Even with the NewDark engine upgrade and high-res panels, we've been condemned to a blurry 4:3 for the past 25 years. The new intro and finale movies – which Nightdive said did not use AI-uprezzing for their recreation – are crisp and gorgeous.

For the uninitiated: you are a UNN space soldier who wakes up aboard the good ship Von Braun on her maiden voyage to Tau Ceti, and the shit hit the fan during your long nap. It's up to you to shoot, hack, and/or mind-blast your way through worm hive-mind aliens to figure out just what's going on, with much of the story told through audio logs strewn through the ship.

The thing I love about *System Shock 2* is its exploration and sense of place, with sprawling maps that you could imagine someone living in before the crisis, while they also serve as excellent stomping grounds for what is ultimately a very abstracted old school dungeon crawler. The Recreation Deck in the back half of the game is a real highlight, with the creature comfort familiarity of a '90s-feeling mall, garden, and gym deliciously out of place on the otherwise-utilitarian vessel.

System Shock 2 is also, honestly, a pretty bad RPG, but in that classic PC gaming way I cherish. You can soft lock yourself at a few points in the story, and while the space wizard PSI powers seem cool, I've yet to stray from the Ol' Reliable build of guns plus hacking.

NICE JUMP

But balance is for chumps, and rough edges grip – I'd take *Shock 2*, warts and all,

over any meticulous skill tree of +5% critical damage nodes. I appreciate Nightdive's restraint in not touching any of that funkiness. Let modders

The revived four-player co-op leaves me conflicted

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A prettied up version of the 1999 sci-fi immersive sim

EXPECT TO PAY
£30

DEVELOPER
Nightdive Studios

PUBLISHER
Nightdive Studios

REVIEWED ON
Steam Deck

MULTIPLAYER
Four-player co-op

LINK
nightdivestudios.com

figure out how to make the hacking minigame not suck while the base experience charts a more conservative course.

The revived four-player co-op leaves me conflicted. I love that it's here, and it sounds like it was a huge lift development-wise, but I do not recommend it as anything more than a single session novelty. There are no technical flaws to its restoration – it works perfectly – it's just fundamentally flawed design-wise.

It's fun enough in that anything shared with a friend can be fun, but *System Shock 2* doesn't build on that appeal. What is an oppressive, cerebral experience solo winds up feeling weirdly cheap and stepped-on in co-op. Audio log-based objective tracking is a headache when you're trying to listen for a door code while your friend(s) are yapping, as well as when your co-gamer grabs a log, forgets to listen to it, and you both wind up completely lost.

It feels bad to lambast the game over an ambitious bonus feature, but you shouldn't seek this one out with co-op as a main priority. Far more transformative was playing it on Steam Deck: Nightdive made a very complicated UI work great on gamepad, and the remaster gets a locked 60fps.

We've certainly come a long way from *System Shock 2* not even being commercially available at the beginning of the 2010s, and playing this PC gaming classic on my giant Valve PSP feels sacrilegious in the most delightful way. Now I just need someone to convince EA and the Embracer Group to let Nightdive go weapons-free on *Ultima Underworld* and *Thief*, respectively. ■

MEET THE CREW

Some of the Von Braun's notables



ANATOLY KORENCHKIN
TrioOptimum Corp. CEO. Does that sound like a good guy?



RENEE DELACROIX
Invented FTL travel, now stuck killing worm aliens.



JANICE POLITO
Your mission control, with no notable twists or surprises.



REBECCA SIDDON
For some reason central to an utterly baffling ending.



WILLIAM BEDFORD DIEGO
A good man pushed to the brink. Voiced by Stephen Russell.



NORRIS
It's made of worms. It even fires worms.

PC GAMER VERDICT

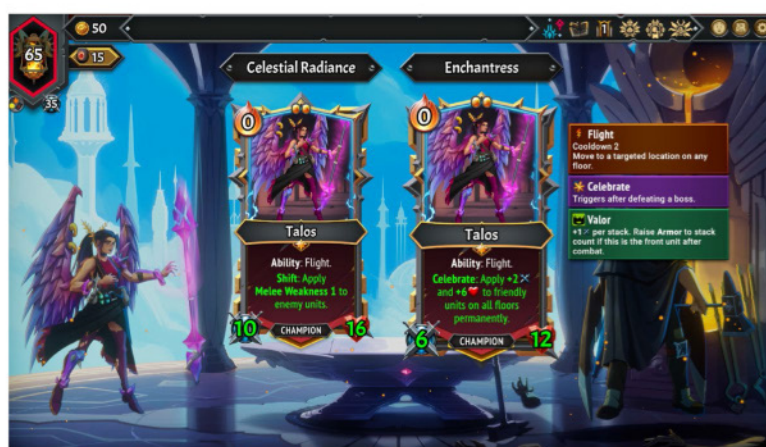
This light-touch remaster makes a perfect pairing with Nightdive's far-reaching *System Shock 1* remake.

85



ABOVE It can be a lot to keep track of visually. We'd recommend starting on desktop and then moving to Steam Deck once you're more familiar with the cards

FAR RIGHT: Each deck has a 'champion', a superpowered monster who'll hopefully lead your units to glory.



FIRST CLASS

Satan's favourite deckbuilder returns aboard **MONSTER TRAIN 2**

By Abbie Stone

I've been more hyped for this sequel than I am for the return of Christ. And if you didn't care for that bit of blasphemy, then *Monster Train*, a game about helping the demons of Hell defeat the goody two-shoes of Heaven, is likely not for you. Everyone else, though, should get ready to play a roguelike deckbuilder that's every bit the equal to *Slay the Spire* and *Balatro*.

Hyperbole? Hardly. *Monster Train* was a great game that shamelessly ripped off and smartly built on *Slay the Spire*'s structure with a welcome layer of tower defence. Structurally, this sequel is near-identical. You still occupy a fancy four-floor train, with a fragile pyre you need to protect occupying the top floor. Every turn several enemies rudely break into your train via floor one. The fools telegraph exactly how they're going to attack so you can plan accordingly, and any surviving enemy at the end of each turn ascends closer to that pyre.

To defend it, you have a deck of spells and the all-important monsters that you strategically place on each floor of the train. It's often as chaotic – and exhilarating – as playing three games of *Slay the Spire* at once. Each deck is made up of a unique clan of monsters, and *Monster Train 2*'s most audacious move is to take all those cards and tear most of them up.

Start the game, and the decks that introduced you to the first *Monster Train* are nowhere to be

seen. Instead, you get the Pyreborn, a clan of gold-hoarding dragons, and the Banished, angels who are now working with the forces of Hell. The Pyreborn can cover enemy units in pyregel, which increases the damage they'll take. They also gain Dragon's Hoard, a new currency that can be exchanged for generous rewards.

I'm not planning on visiting Hell myself, so I won't spoil every new clan, but I'm hopelessly in love with

the Underlegion. They're sentient mushrooms whose powers involve spawning and decaying. Certain cards will spawn a funguy, a laughably weak lil shroom.

FRESH HELL

But spawning more funguy on the same floor doesn't add another. It 'stacks', essentially buffing the first funguy with more health and strength. Another monster has the power to spawn two more funguy stacks at the end of every turn. Steadily you can Magikarp your funguy into a monster that rivals anything in the game.

Decay is a nasty status effect that inflicts a set amount of damage

Decay is a nasty status effect that inflicts a set amount of damage every turn. Lots of the Underlegion's monsters and spells can inflict it, but one monster in particular, my special horrid mushroom boy, inflicts three decay on all enemies every time you summon a monster. Oh, and spawning another stack of funguy absolutely counts as a summon. *Monster Train 2* is full of these delightful synergies. Each run is played with two clan decks combined, so the fun comes from trying to discover them.

New room cards set a rule on an entire floor, like a wonderfully risky one that deals 50 damage to everyone at the end of each turn. Equipment cards are also a fine new addition, offering permanent buffs when applied. And am I not getting into the spirit of things if I thank God for the fact there's now an undo button?

Let's take a break from all this praise for a moment to talk about the story. Both of you who were hoping for a more narrative-heavy *Monster Train* sequel are in luck. The rest of us have to click through cutscenes and 'comedy' vignettes between the characters. None of this is terrible, but nor is it terribly interesting really.

Anyone hoping for a revolution will also admittedly be disappointed. This is definitely a sequel that adds new ideas to the old train engine, rather than trying something completely original. But *Monster Train*'s terrific locomotive didn't need an overhaul, and when there's so many brilliant ideas in the huge roster of new cards, it feels churlish to complain. Sixty hours in and I still feel like I've only scratched the surface. *Slay the Spire 2* might have to grant access to actual Heaven to top this. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Devilish deckbuilder with an inspired injection of tower defence.

EXPECT TO PAY
£21

DEVELOPER
Shiny Shoe

PUBLISHER
Big Fan Games

REVIEWED ON
AMD Z1 Extreme, 16GB RAM, AMD Radeon Graphics

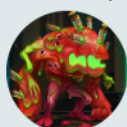
STEAM DECK
Verified

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/2742830/Monster_Train_2

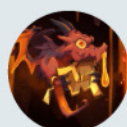
CARD SHARKS *Four of our favourite monsters*



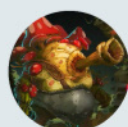
SCRIVENER
Summons and cheapens spell cards. Great for cheapskates like us.



PINCUSHION
Gains persistent power the more equipment you waste on it. Cost us countless runs, this.



SNOTTY WHELP
Sneezes debuffing snot all over your opponents. We're almost as grateful as we are disgusted.



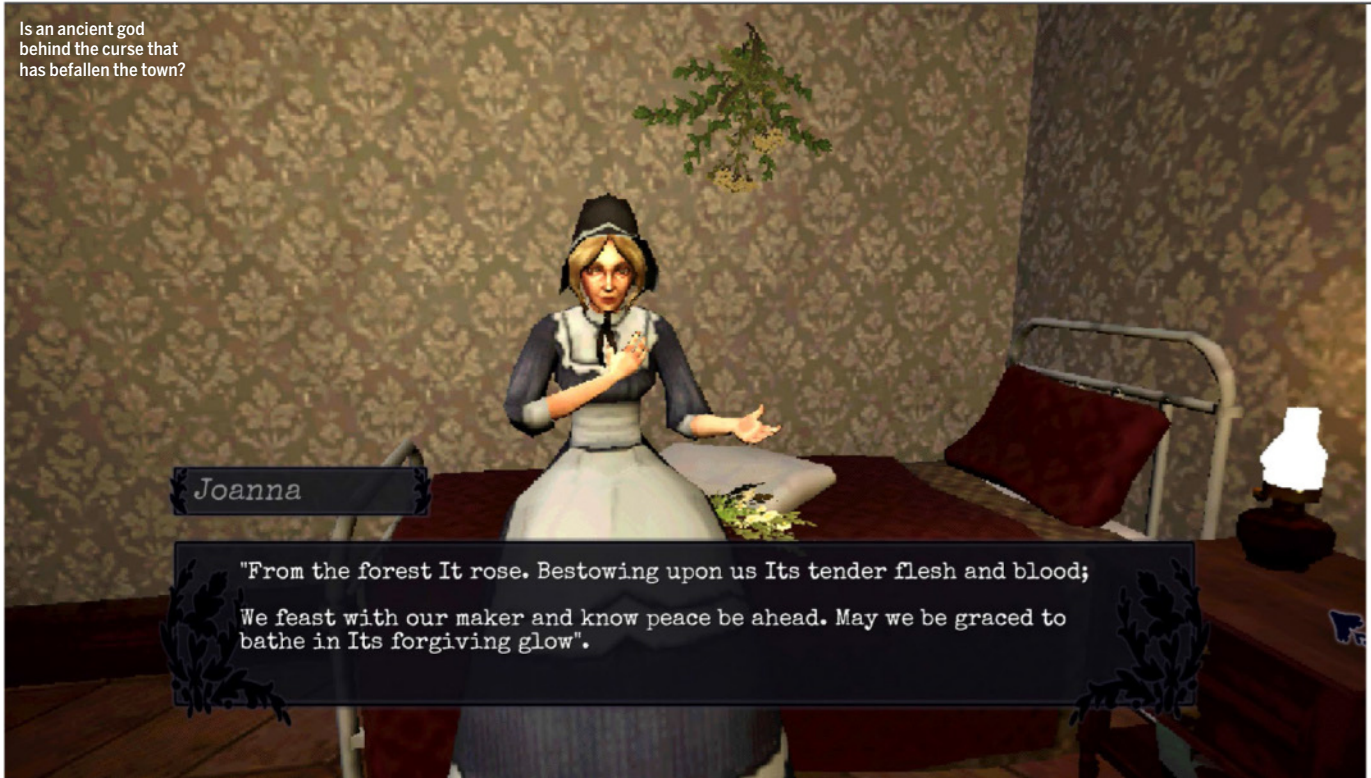
SPORE LAUNCHER
Piles up tons of nasty decay on your foes. Let's stop looking at its trunk/thing now.

PC GAMER VERDICT

An all-time great deckbuilder *Monster Train* gets a sequel worth risking God's wrath for.

91

Is an ancient god behind the curse that has befallen the town?



DOCTOR DOCTOR

Save or sacrifice in **TRIAGE**

The town of Stagmarch is subject to a horrifying plague. Most of the townsfolk are dead, but three of the infected have ended up in your clinic, each bearing different symptoms of an illness that, if left unchecked, may cause them to transform into monsters. Never mind that there is no permanent cure, and forget about the fact that the previous doctor died in mysterious circumstances. It's time to save some lives.

Or to delay some deaths for a bit, anyway. Like any doctor, you can only do so much, and your method of helping people in triage is to jumble up some herbs. Handily, there are loads of herbs in your garden.

Unhandily, you can only prepare one vial of treatment a day, so you have to choose which of your patients to give it to. Anyone who receives the tincture will survive for another night – but then so will your other patients, confusingly. The outcomes of your choices don't take effect until the end of the game, although I still found it a muddled story that fails to make the most of its choose-who-lives premise.

I think *Triage* is worth playing, however, as it tells an interesting story with surprisingly deep

characters. Will you choose to save the seamstress, a beloved figure in the town, but one who is devoted to an iffy eldritch god? Or how about the journalist, who might be able to discover what's really going on, and get the word out?

Surely you can't ignore the hunter, who keeps the townsfolk's stomachs lined with meat? As I said, your choices won't result in anyone's deaths right away, but in a way that's a good thing as they all have new things to share when the next day rolls around.

TRICK OR TREATMENT

Each of your patients has a story to tell, and they get progressively darker and more interesting as the days go on. None are squeaky clean,

Each of your patients has a story to tell, and they get darker

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A game about saving people from a mysterious plague. But who to save?

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
5'Digital

PUBLISHER
Champlain College

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/TriageGame

so there's a sense that the plague might be a divine punishment, but you can also use their past deeds to help you decide who deserves to be saved. Can someone's utility outweigh their sins? These are the sort of questions you may end up asking yourself.

I chose to not treat the seamstress, as she was opposed to treatment anyway, and I'm not sure I regretted that decision as she spiralled into fervour. Instead, I focused the treatment on the journalist, curious to see whether she could uncover the truth. Unfortunately, the conclusion was disappointing. While some will live and some will die, and that's an interesting outcome in itself, you won't get a lot of satisfaction from the ending slides. In the end, it's just a little too unclear about the effects of our decision-making for those decisions to carry much weight. ■

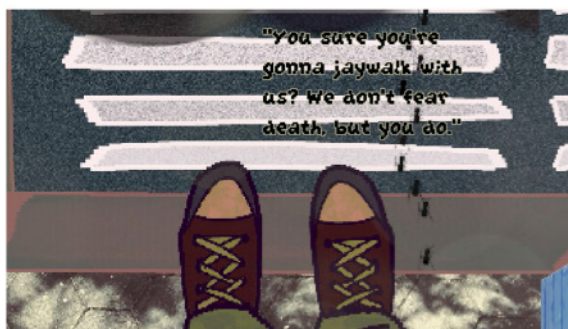
PC GAMER

VERDICT

Doesn't quite follow through on its premise, but it's a good time getting to know these fascinating characters.

66

BELOW: You're not able to squash the ants.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Harper Shen

LINK
bit.ly/SpiritAnts

WALK THE LINE

The ants know the score in **THE SPIRIT OF THE ANTS**

As someone who spends a lot of time looking down at their feet, dodging our dog-shit-filled pavements, I finally have a game that lets me do that, minus the dog shit. And what a wonderful world it is, full of life and noise and rather a lot of chatty ants.

The Spirit of the Ants is a walking sim, in that it simulates the experience of walking around. By holding down the mouse button, you will slowly shuffle down the street, staring at your feet and the detritus around them. The game is exciting simply because it's a view we're not normally given in games, which understandably want to show us that impressive vista or that photorealistic NPC – not the paving stones or mud we're thoughtlessly squelching underfoot.

However, by not showing us the wider environment it allows our

imaginations to pick up the slack. Do you really feel like you're present in the city when you're sliding *Watch Dogs* Guy along the street? On the other hand (well, foot), every step in *Ants* grounded me in the setting, as it renders one element in exceptional detail, while leaving the rest to our equally capable imaginations.

It's doubly impressive because it doesn't even take place in a cohesive environment, but rather a patchwork labyrinth that sees you hitting dead ends and retracing your steps to find the maze's heart. A long line of ants is leading you somewhere, and they're speaking poetically at you, and it's not clear what they're on about even as the labyrinth seems to draw you into a childhood memory. This is still a memorable walking game, revealing a side of the world typically obscured from view. ■

77

SOLID SNEAKING

Filling in the blanks in **STEALTH CROSSWORD**

There are a couple of ways you could go when making a game from a preposterous concept. You could really commit to it, finding the kind of game that results when you mash things together – and you take every element seriously. Or, well, you could turn it into one giant joke.

I would have said that the first approach obviously results in a better game, and is probably the way to go if you're more interested in game design. However, there's ample room in this world for big, stupid gags. While *Stealth Crossword* isn't a particularly good stealth or crossword game, it does commit to the comedic ridiculousness of its premise, piling on punchlines and over-the-top set pieces until the whole thing collapses, grinning, under the weight of its own stupidity.

Stealth Crossword is a *Metal Gear Solid* parody, complete with guards with big vision cones that you have to sneak past to... well, here comes the crossword bit. Each level is also a crossword grid, and you have to fill in the letters, by sneaking A or Q or whatever past the guards and to the square they're supposed to go in.

I can see how another game might expand upon the concept, giving you more tools to play around with, more devious crosswords perhaps. But *Stealth Crossword* isn't interested in repeating itself, and instead plays around with the presentation.

I've over-analysed it, probably, but hopefully vaguely enough that the gags are still intact. Give it a download and enjoy a laugh or three. *Stealth Crossword* sacrifices game design for gag design, and it's all the better for it. ■

BELOW: The stealth is very easy, with guards that are mostly stationary.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
ComputerJames

LINK
bit.ly/StealthCross

75



PLAGUE RECOLLECTION

Making all the Reik moves in **VERMINTIDE 2**

The best thing about skaven isn't that they're scheming, disgusting, or numberless; it's that they're annoying. In a fantasy world of dragon-riding elves, floating toad wizards, and actual gods, it's amazing to think that the chittering rats are the biggest threat to order. The first *Vermintide* game shows them at their chittering, countless best; the challenge with the sequel, then, is keeping them compelling.

The sequel does the most sensible thing possible, and adds another faction to the mix. In the Old World of Warhammer, skaven are like the nasty, capering kids who aren't big enough to be in the proper Chaos gang. The events in the *Vermintide* games are almost like their initiation ceremony – 'You can't be one of the ruinous powers unless you help us destroy this planet'. So it makes sense for them to team up with Nurgle, the Chaos God of decay and rebirth. They form a disgusting tag team for *Vermintide 2*, like your food waste bin making friends with your filthy sink trap. It's a great narrative and physical combination: the fast, fragile ratmen alongside tanky, lumbering chaos warriors. It also means they've

The nasty kids who aren't big enough to be in the proper Chaos gang

picked two of the most characterful baddies in the Warhammer universe: the gurgling, cheerful, fatherly vibes of Nurgle contrast nicely against the cowardly, duplicitous skaven. It adds some much needed variety to the flow of combat. Enemies still fall into the same categories – ones you can kill easily, ones that are a challenge, and ones you wish the game's AI would stop spawning altogether – but it feels like a significant upgrade from the first game.

KEEPIN' IT GROMRIL

Truthfully, *Vermintide*'s variety has always come from the characters, rather than the locations or enemies. It's a series in which you're happy to rerun the same levels over and over,

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
First-person pest control in the grimmest version of Warhammer's Old World

EXPECT TO PAY
£24

DEVELOPER
Fatshark

PUBLISHER
Fatshark

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700, 16 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce GTX 1070

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/552500/Warhammer_Vermintide_2/

not just because the AI changes it each time, but because even the way a weapon swings can change the tone of a fight. *Vermintide 2* takes this to its logical conclusion, offering character careers that further refine how they play. Sometimes these are extensions of existing traits, but there's scope here to play your favourite character in a totally different way, such as making Bardin ditch all his armour and run around in his smalls. At times it feels like the AI Director is possessed of a Tzeentchian capacity for reading your mind and spawning exactly what you were praying it wouldn't. This can lead to some frustrating wipes that feel like you failed, even though you didn't really do anything wrong. But this is part of the *Vermintide* process. Repetition is at the heart of the game, even if it means repeatedly fulfilling your Slayer oath. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Gnarly, challenging, and perfectly regenerative: *Vermintide 2* is the Chaos troll of multiplayer games.

83

BELOW: Play this section while eating toasted marshmallows.



STANZ AND DELIVER

Gozer your own way in **GHOSTBUSTERS: THE VIDEO GAME**

One thing that always surprises me about the original Ghostbusters, apart from the scene in which Ray Stanz randomly and unnecessarily receives spectral fellatio, is how mercenary it is. We cheer as they charge thousands for removing malign presences and flout environmental protection laws. It's libertarian propaganda with Twinkie jokes.

The videogame continuation of the story has you as the new recruit in an organisation that would probably try and stiff you out of your medical insurance when a positron collider burns off your face. And this is part of what makes the game such a potent piece of nostalgia: the original Ghostbusters treat you exactly how you'd expect. Ray is delighted with you, Peter gently bullying, Egon is

weird and aloof, and Winston is underwritten. It's exactly what anyone who loves the films would expect and want, and it's notable for being Ramis' final, non-CGI wraith performance as Spengler. It's a good job you're surrounded by such rich personalities, since your character is as generic as they come.

It also helps that you're also surrounded by almost every character from the first two movies, crammed into the game in a way that feels satisfying rather than excessive. Janine is here, rocking statement glasses and Stay-Puft earrings. And Walter Peck turns up too. The story is as convoluted as you want from a *Ghostbusters* game, and there's a tactile thrill to actually capturing a ghost. Nine-year-old me would never dare dream that a game like this could exist. ■

72

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£20

DEVELOPER
Saber Interactive

PUBLISHER
Mad Dog Games, LLC

GNAT'S LIFE

Big hunter becomes the hunted in **GROUNDED**

We're rounding up the pest control theme with *Grounded*, a game that captures the same feeling as exploring the garden with a net and magnifying glass, except here there's always a chance of having your internal organs slowly digested by spider venom.

It's the sort of game that smells like freshly cut grass. That might make it sound quite sedate and cosy, and there is an element of that, but it's also a survival game. There are moments where you, a literal shrunken child, are being hunted by spiders the size of cars, relatively speaking. It's about learning the patterns and reactions of the inhabitants that surround you, and using that as a weapon, encouraging creatures to fight each other rather than devouring you. In this sense, it

captures that unique childhood thrill of finding two scary insects, popping them in a jar, and seeing which one wins. The only difference here is that you're in the jar with them.

Any sense that this is a whimsical, cosy space disappears at night, when every chirp, rustle, and suspicious noise carries the possibility of a terrifying death. I'm not sure I'd sleep in my garden as a jumbo-sized human – I don't want slugs up my nose and earwigs in my brain – so the thought of doing it as a tiny, mostly-defenceless human is the stuff of pulp magazine horrors. This is a small part of a game that's full of adventure: where every bit of discarded rubbish could provide shelter, and every verdant lawn thick with hidden horrors. Honey, I Shrunk The Kids suddenly feels like an exercise in generational trauma. ■

BELOW: Perfectly designed killing machine vs child.



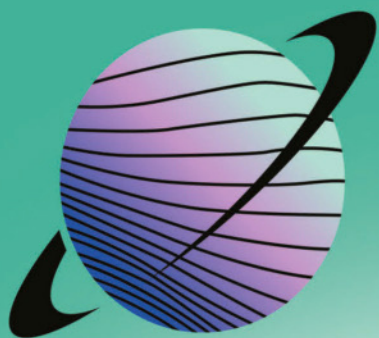
NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£17

DEVELOPER
Obsidian Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Xbox Game Studios

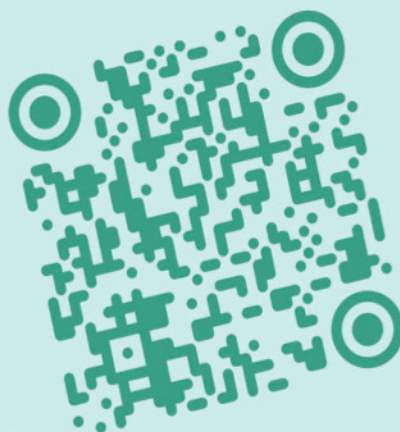
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PLANETARY PROCESSING

MULTIPLAYER ONLINE GAMES? EASY.

**WE DO THE HEAVY LIFTING SO
YOU CAN DO THE FUN STUFF.**



HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE

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GROUP TEST

Keep your CPU super cool with one of the best new liquid coolers

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TECH REPORT

How the humble Xbox controller became the PC's default gamepad

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TECH BUILD

A stunning all white small form-factor gaming PC showcased

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BUYER'S GUIDE

Craft the best gaming rig for your budget with our ideal components guide



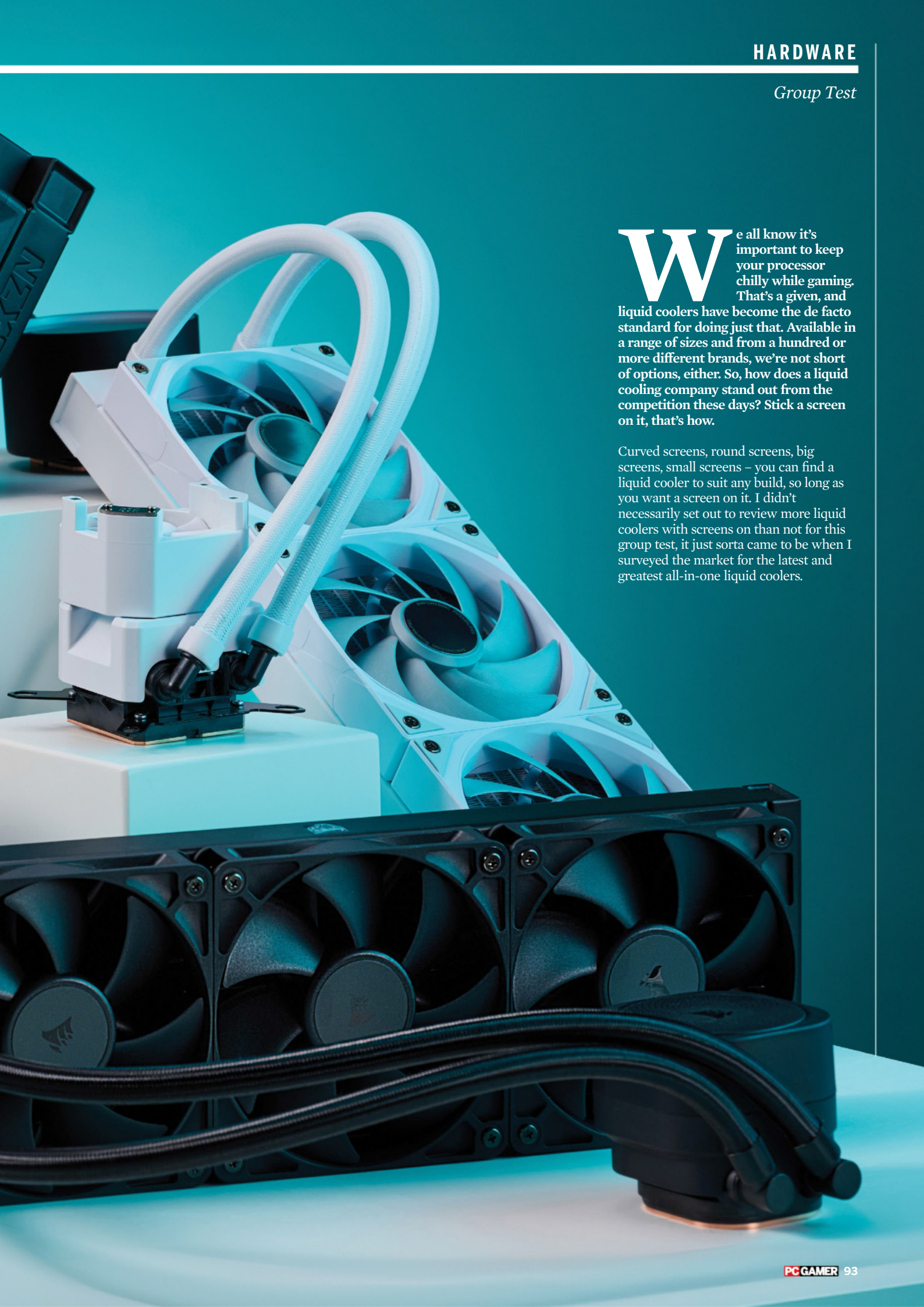
GROUP TEST

LIQUID COOLERS

You don't need a screen on your liquid cooler for top performance, but don't tell this lot

By Jacob Ridley





We all know it's important to keep your processor chilly while gaming. That's a given, and liquid coolers have become the de facto standard for doing just that. Available in a range of sizes and from a hundred or more different brands, we're not short of options, either. So, how does a liquid cooling company stand out from the competition these days? Stick a screen on it, that's how.

Curved screens, round screens, big screens, small screens – you can find a liquid cooler to suit any build, so long as you want a screen on it. I didn't necessarily set out to review more liquid coolers with screens on than not for this group test, it just sorta came to be when I surveyed the market for the latest and greatest all-in-one liquid coolers.



Panorama ARGB 360

TRYX £330

Curvy cooler

1 We can't get enough of the Tryx Panorama. We've used it in a couple of recent PC builds, and I've personally fit it inside a brand new gaming PC we were quite literally giving away. My first impression with it left me impressed with just how easy it is to fit, considering there's a huge screen that slots over the pump unit. Though you do have to be sure you can orient it the way it's intended to be, as it doesn't allow for any meaningful adjustments.

The Tryx offers performance in line with many of the top liquid coolers today. The average temperatures in gaming tests bear that out, managing to be

within a degree or two of the Cooler Master Masterliquid 360 Core II and NZXT Kraken Elite 360 RGB. That's a good thing, as these are two of the top coolers we've used recently. What's most surprising about the Tryx is how little it requires to get connected and set up. There's a fan cable, as per usual, and a USB header, which is also not that unusual for a modern AIO. Altogether a fairly minimal approach for a liquid cooler with an entire screen attached to it.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Looks ace
- Easy to fit
- Limited orientation

SPECS SIZE: 240/280/360MM / **PUMP:** ASETEK 8TH GEN V2 (2600 RPM) / **FANS:** ROTASL ARGB

Thicc Q60

HYTE £210

Thick as heck

2 The Hyte Thicc Q60 is sure to turn a lot of heads. It's a liquid cooler with what is effectively an entire phone attached to the pump unit. It actually has its own CPU, admittedly an ARM-based one, and RAM and storage – all under that big ol' 5-inch screen.

Is it too much? You can be the judge of that. I've built a handful of gaming PCs with this cooler and, sure, it's a talking point, but are they better for its use? This cooler struggles to keep a high-end Core i7 or Core i9 CPU at a respectable temperature during intensive workloads, and has to ramp up its high-speed fans often to do so, but it would

likely deal with an AMD Ryzen or Arrow Lake Intel processor just fine. That's the thing with the Thicc Q60, it is very thick, but not very long. It's only a 240mm radiator, with two 120mm Thicc FP12 fans attached. Though it is very stocky and that allows it to do a great job considering its size, it's worse than a 360mm AIO. Hyte is working on one of those, but for now, this is your only option. It's pretty loud for its size, too, and even Hyte keep the fans limited at 65% out of the box.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Stocky
- Vibrant
- Not 360mm

SPECS SIZE: 240MM / **PUMP:** DUAL HARMONIC (4500 RPM) / **FANS:** THICC FP12

THE KRAKEN ELITE IS A GREAT COOLER, WITH LOTS OF POSITIVES TO ITS NAME



GROUP TEST

iCUE Link Titan 360 RX LCD

CORSAIR £260

Linked up

3 Corsair has stuck a subtle screen on the Titan 360 RX LCD. I know, Corsair, subtle... but I'm only talking about the small, customisable LCD screen here, there's still a heap of RGB lighting across the pump unit and fans to liven things up a bit. The screen on the Corsair shows handy stats from your computer, such as temperatures, or can be set up to display GIFs or images. Though to do all that, you first have to hook this cooler up to your system. Unlike the Tryx, you will need to sort many cables, connectors, and even hubs to get it up-and-running. It's made for use within the iCUE Link

ecosystem, using Corsair's proprietary cables and connectors, which is great – if you are using that elsewhere in your system. It's made for iCUE Link and it's not worth installing the hub and cables for this cooler alone. I did build an iCUE Link system to give it a proper go and it is pretty great when everything's hooked up together and controlled in one application. Corsair does make the pump inside the Titan itself, too, and it is very quiet – that's a win.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Great for iCUE systems
- Looks great
- Complicated set-up

SPECS SIZE: 240/360MM / PUMP: IN-HOUSE FLOWDRIVE / FANS: RX120 RGB

Kraken Elite 360

NZXT £280

Stylish

4 NZXT has gone its own way with its pump design for the Kraken Elite. It's called Turbine and it's one of the differentiators between this cooler and heaps of others, many of which rely on Asetek-made pumps. But not to get too bogged down in the details, why that's a good thing is that the Kraken Elite is a great cooler, with lots of positives to its name.

For starters, the cooler performs well in gaming tests, generally averaging on the lower side of the scale for similarly-sized coolers. Lower is better when it comes to temps, so that's a win. Then

there's the screen, which is a 2.72-inch IPS unit with a 60Hz refresh rate. Overkill for a cooler? Of course, but then it's definitely up there for looks. It's sharp, clear, and bright.

The downside to the NZXT is that it didn't get down to idle temperature very quickly following an intensive test run, and that's likely due to the slower spinning speed of these compared to some in this test. That does help keep noise to a minimum, at least.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Gorgeous display
- Easy install
- Fans could be better

SPECS SIZE: 240/360MM / PUMP: IN-HOUSE (2800 RPM) / FANS: F360 RGB CORE FAN

COMES WITH AN
INFINITY MIRROR
EFFECT ON THE PUMP
AND RGB FANS



GROUP TEST



BENCHMARKS

Baldur's Gate III
(1080p + Ultra preset, +/- 5 degrees, Core i7 14700K)

■ Max temperature (°C)
■ Average temperature (°C)

Tryx Panorama ARGB 360 2024



Hyte Thicc Q60



Corsair iCUE Link Titan 360 RX LCD



NZXT Kraken Elite 360 RGB 2024



Cooler Master Masterliquid 360 Core II



Corsair Nautilus 360 RS



Masterliquid 360 Core II

COOLER MASTER £95

Straightforward

5 Finally, a liquid cooler without a screen attached to it. The even better news is that this AIO is a mighty performer, managing to reliably outperform others in this test across games and CPU-intensive benchmarks.

For its performance, you might expect a huge price tag, but actually that's not the case at all. This reasonably affordable AIO is proof that we really have hit a ceiling for pump performance, and it's acoustics and extras that manufacturers are fighting over now with more expensive models. If you don't care for all that, you can get everything you need right here.

This isn't the loudest cooler on the market, by any means, and Cooler Master's G9R pump works splendidly. There's still some glamour to the MasterLiquid: it comes with an infinity mirror effect on the pump and RGB fans. It's not the prettiest compared to others I've tested, but the fans and pump look the part within a stylish PC case. You can also hide the cable mess with daisy-chained cables, which also makes for an easy install process.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Simple
- Affordable
- Top performance

SPECS SIZE: 240/360MM / PUMP: IN-HOUSE G9R DUAL CHAMBER PUMP (3100 RPM) / FANS: REVAMPED COOLER MASTER

Nautilus 360 RS

CORSAIR £110

Stealthy

6 The Nautilus 360 RS is an all-in-one stripped back to the basics. It's Corsair without iCUE Link, and it's honestly better for it as a standalone unit versus the pricier Titan. Sure, iCUE Link is nice if you're buying an entirely new system using largely Corsair components, but for many of us looking for an upgrade, the Nautilus is a better bet.

The Nautilus performed very well in testing, even beating the Titan in a few tests by a degree or two. That's well within variance for cooler testing but it just goes to show that the cheaper model isn't necessarily leagues away from the top-tier one. The

Nautilus also kept noise to a relatively low level, and the pump isn't particularly loud, either.

It's a stealthy unit, with not an iota of RGB lighting in sight. That's going to suit some PC builders, and I might be a convert to the look after installing it. Though one bugbear I have with the Nautilus is that, despite being able to remove the front logo'd pump cover, you can't rotate it. It'll only sit one way, so beware if you're mounting it any other way than intended.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- No frills
- Good performance
- One ideal orientation

SPECS SIZE: 240/360MM / PUMP: LOW-NOISE DESIGN / FANS: RS120



BACHELOR PAD

How the Xbox controller became the PC's de facto input method

The mouse and keyboard will always be PC gaming's mitre and sceptre. There's nothing more indicative of our platform's culture than using peripherals designed for typing and clicking on desktop icons for 360 noscopes, and as such they'll be on desktops forevermore. But for the last 20 years, they've had some company there.

It wasn't a sudden shift, like 1080p monitors, or AI-laden graphics cards. Instead, the Xbox controller's invasion was slower and sneakier. It crept up behind enemy lines, tip-toeing across from the console downstairs, arranged itself enticingly on our desk and just waited until the next time we wanted to play a racing game or a platformer.

It seemed to happen almost by accident. Indeed, when Big Billy Gates and his team decided a Microsoft home console might be a decent idea, they also decided to use a proprietary modification of USB as a connection for its peripherals, which meant they couldn't also be used on PCs. The most likely explanation? They probably just didn't think people would want to use them that way. And they were probably right.

Indeed, when the first Xbox launched in 2001, using a controller input with PC games was distinctly uncommon. Look at the biggest releases of that year on

the platform and you'll see the likes of *Black & White*, *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, *Operation Flashpoint* and *Civilization III* – games for whom plugging a pad in offers no obvious benefit.

Worse, games of this era didn't ship with default controller mappings, partly because we didn't demand such a luxury in great numbers, and partly because there was absolutely no consensus as to what a controller should be. How many buttons, D-pads, analogue sticks and triggers: these things were all up for debate.

PARTY LINES

But change was coming. Because among those titles I carefully selected to make my point were the likes of *Max Payne* and *Grand Theft Auto III*, as popular on consoles as they were on PC. The lines of delineation were blurring as the PS2 and Xbox era gave way for the PS3 and Xbox 360, and what people wanted on one platform, they generally wanted on another.

Nowhere was that more obvious than with *Halo*. Originally planned as a PC release, Microsoft swooped in and ensured it would be a unit-shifting exclusive for its new console instead, causing many gnashed teeth and hammered keyboards. *Halo* became the proto-console shooter, designed to play best with a controller. The swappable duo of weapons Master Chief carried was a



Edgelords

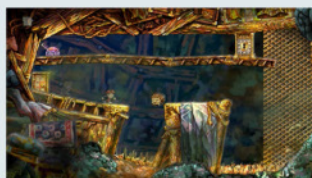
The real tragedy? The DualSense Edge is probably the best first-party console controller there's ever been. That rich, textured haptic feedback, the adaptive triggers that make firing a gun feel extra satisfying, and gorgeously articulate analogue sticks. It should be the no-brainer option for anyone who can afford it, but a combination of non-universal support for its haptic feedback and triggers and that accumulated distrust for plugging anything with a PlayStation logo into a PC means it's not ubiquitous among high-end PC setups.



FAR LEFT: It's basically all *Halo's* fault that we even need controllers in the first place.

LEFT: Vista was the first OS with native Xbox controller support. Steady on, Steve.

BRAVELY DEFAULT *Four games that laid the way for the Xbox controller's PC invasion*



BRAID

The poster boy who led the charge. You could run, jump, ponder and despair with a keyboard, but it's less fun.



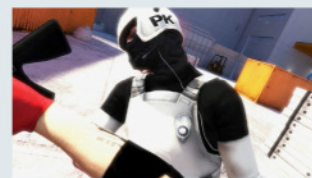
RACE DRIVER: GRID

One of the first racers that mapped the throttle and brake to analogue triggers, with great effect.



GRAND THEFT AUTO IV

Ever tried bowling with Roman using a mouse and keyboard? No. Nobody has. And no one ever will.



MIRROR'S EDGE

A first-person game that made you feel more in the flow with a pad in your hands. And this guy's neck.

concession to the Xbox controller's fewer button mappings versus a keyboard. How would design choices like that hold up when *Halo* made its belated arrival on PC?

As it turned out, that would be the least of PC gamers' worries because the Windows version ran like a flip book, but it was moments like this that sowed seeds. PC gamers were playing an increasing number of titles that were designed very deliberately to feel satisfying whether you were using a controller or the holy mouse and keyboard combo.

A NEW SPIN

So when the Xbox 360 arrived in 2005 with a familiar USB-A connection, a pair of analogue triggers and a Windows driver, PC gamers got to thinking. Some had both an Xbox and a PC, which meant they already had a pad connected to their console that'd work with their Windows system. Others went out and bought a 360 controller specifically to use with their (inevitably all-black, probably Alienware) desktop tower.

Microsoft was serious about pad support on home computers by this time. When Windows Vista released in January 2007, it brought native support for the 360 controller without the need to download a specific driver. A significant change had taken place within our ecosystem, all in the space of six years.

It helped that the 360 controller was incredibly well designed, and constructed to a level that only a giant like Microsoft who can manufacture things at huge scale could achieve. Gamepads before the 360 controller weren't just

disorganised in their layouts, they also felt like they'd been made from melted down Kinder Surprise toys. They were flimsy and rarely laid out their buttons with much thought for ergonomics. They didn't all offer vibration. Their inputs were often loose and plasticky. Microsoft's pad wasn't like them. It felt considered. Sturdy. And perhaps the fact it was beige made it easier to integrate into a desktop setup.

The games helped a lot too, mind you. The 360's native support on PC coincided with not only the arrival of racing games that made proper use of its analogue triggers, but also an industry-wide indie boom that saw all manner of retro arcade oddities wash up on our native shores. *Braid*, *World of Goo*, *Binding of Isaac* and their ilk felt instinctively like games you'd want to control with a pad, given the choice, and now we had one.

One last thing to consider: the Xbox controller remained our default choice through Xbox 360 to Xbox One to Xbox Series X/S, because Sony barely ever made a play for that PC controller territory. The PS3 DualShock controller didn't support Windows at all, and the PS4's DualShock 4, designed as it was with specific features like the touchpad, the ambient light and speaker, wasn't easy to use with full functionality either. By the time a Windows driver was written for it, its die had been cast as a fiddly beast to use on PC. It's a similar story for the excellent DualSense, which still isn't fully feature-operational in Windows without third-party software intervention. Maybe if Sony had ever seemed bothered by the idea, we might all be tapping triangle instead of Y at our PCs today. ■

Phil Iwanik

GAMES OF THIS ERA DIDN'T SHIP WITH DEFAULT CONTROLLER BUTTON MAPPINGS

REAL TORQUE

Five years after the lockdown sim racing boom, direct drive's hit the mainstream

The new normal. Remember how often we heard and repeated that phrase during 2020? Gosh, these face coverings get itchy, don't they? Still, we'll have to get used to it, because wearing them is the new normal. It was a platitude we used when queuing outside supermarkets in two-metre intervals as the tape on the floor dictated; when observing our overgrown hair in the mirror; when walking past a baking ingredients aisle stripped bare, and when spending our Friday nights doing a 'pub quiz' (aka arguing with our families about the names of British rivers) over Zoom.

Never did we dare to countenance that the new normal might one day seem like merely a temporary suspension of the old normal, and that the old normal would one day return in all its boring glory. Perhaps it was old-fashioned superstition during a traumatic period that felt frighteningly out of our control, or a desire to show we were willing to adapt to the circumstances in order to keep each other safe. Five years after the fact, it's hard to tap back into that mindset and pin down its precise workings.

Among the disruption, the worry, the grief and the stress, there were positives. For the gaming and tech sectors, a boom took place that shouldn't have caught everybody off guard but did. And for sim racing, once a niche within a niche of racing game fandom, a coming of age moment took place.

FLAT OUT

The problem for sim racing during that lockdown boom was that supply couldn't meet demand. It was as though every Fanatec PR person's wildest dreams had come true: huge captive audiences watched as Formula One stars streamed themselves in online competitions against celebrities. The most aspirational motorsport figures in the world were

constantly popping up in their ubiquitous sim racing rigs and bigger viewerships than ever were tuning in to watch them use that hardware. Sim racing had become the new normal, and gamers wanted in on the action. But they couldn't, because stock shortages had become the new normal too.

A half-decade later, Nacon's RevoSim direct drive bundle enters the market with a 9Nm direct drive base and load cell brake pedal, and it's priced at £699. And the mind-blowing part is, it isn't even the cheapest direct drive option on the market. Moza's R3 bundle is available for under £450 now, and Thrustmaster's innovative T598 with its axial direct drive motor costs £450 too.

What we're seeing is the sim racing hardware market finally managing to meet the consumer demands of 2020. It's taken that long to overcome the factory closures, the semiconductor shortages and the inherent lag of bringing new products through from

design to production during a global pandemic.

STARS STREAMED THEMSELVES IN ONLINE COMPETITIONS

INPUT LAG

It isn't that consumer behaviour in sim racing has continued to create a boom, and made the creation of these affordable direct drive wheel bundles seem like a no-brainer. By several measurable metrics, there have been some notable dips since the days of the new normal. F1 esports changed ownership in 2023 and lost much of the momentum it had gathered in the silence and inactivity that followed. Fanatec, one of the biggest names in the industry, saw its parent company Endor AG file for insolvency and the brand sold to Corsair. These aren't happenings that would make a hardware manufacturer lick their lips and trip over themselves in the rush to bring new products to market.

Instead, manufacturers have zoomed out. The Covid bubble burst, just like it did for every other sub-sector of gaming, but interest in sim racing hasn't dissipated. It may

Image credit: Getty



PHIL IWANIK
Veteran 'lancer Phil got his start in sim racing back in the noughties, when competitors used a complex array of leather straps, wooden beams and livestock to control their games.

DAILY DRIVERS *Four sims that put your direct drive setup to work*



ASSETTO CORSA COMPETIZIONE
The future's uncertain for ACC now that dev Kunos is focusing on Aspetto Corsa Evo in Early Access, but it's still the ultimate GT3 sim.



LE MANS ULTIMATE
A WEC licence, some convincing handling and even an option to race for a full 24 hours in online co-op. Good luck with that pitch.



RENNSPORT
It's dropped the NFT and esports stuff and started to focus on delivering brilliant racing. A sound strategy.



EA WRC
Sadly the publisher pulled the plug after just one edition of fantastic loose surface racing, but luckily it's packed with content.



ABOVE: F1's new generation have embraced sim racing, helping to grow the sport further.

BELOW: A DD wheel and pedals for under £500 would have been pure sci-fi five years ago.

not be pulling in the same audience sizes as the biggest MOBA tournaments, but in addition to the gamers who simply want to race, and watch the best in the world meet on the virtual track, there's an ever-growing contingent of aspiring motorsport pros.

Not long ago, the only route into a career as a race driver was to spend hundreds of thousands – literally that much, and more – on junior karting championships and paid drives in feeder categories. Several of the current F1 grid's families spent their preceding years living in trailers to fund their sons' dreams. Consider the finances if you're in their position: £699 might buy you 15 public outdoor karting sessions, or a setup that your kid can practice their skills on endlessly, for no further outlay.

And that means that this long-awaited, hard fought breakthrough moment might be more significant than it seems. Affordable direct drive wheels don't just give racing gamers the equipment to compete online, they also give the next generation of real racing drivers the tools on which to hone their craft. ■



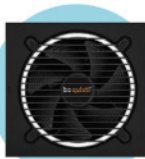
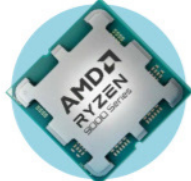
THE BUILD

White goods

By Jacob Ridley



TOTAL COST £1,844

1 COOLER  Hyper 612 Apex Cooler Master £55 If you're tired of the parade of liquid coolers with screens, RGB gizmos and absurdly price tags, let me introduce you to the Hyper 612 Apex. A heatsink with fans on either side – nothing abnormal or over the top about that. Though the Hyper 612 Apex does crank up the style points by including a couple of outer covers, for the fans and top of the heatsink, to keep everything looking uniform. And don't be fooled, despite its affordability, it has one neat feature to make installation easier: the fans slide in and out of the heatsink!	2 MOTHERBOARD  Phantom Gaming B850I Lightning WiFi ASRock £198 A compact Mini-ITX motherboard with plenty of ports.			
	3 CASE  S100 Tempered Glass Snow Edition Thermaltake £40 This stylish PC case hides a secret: it's actually very affordable.			
9 FANS  Sickleflow Edge 360 ARGB White Edition Cooler Master £53 If you're loading three fans into your PC, this unit does the job with only four screws.	8 POWER SUPPLY  Pure Power 12 M 850 W Be Quiet! £110 A trustworthy power supply with plenty of Watts. The modular cables remove any unnecessary mess, too.	7 SSD  P44 Pro 2 TB Solidigm £187 A slightly older SSD that works great for gaming. If you can spare the budget, a faster PCIe 5.0 SSD would be good.	6 MEMORY  DDR5 Pro 64 GB Crucial £171 A set of finely tuned memory for AMD Ryzen systems, right in the CPU's sweet spot for speed at 6,000MT/s.	5 PROCESSOR  Ryzen 7 9800X3D AMD £420 The Ryzen 7 9800X3D is rapid in its calculations thanks to a stack of extra cache placed under the processing cores.

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick these parts if you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

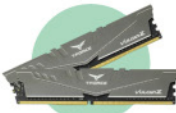
You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£1,055

MOTHERBOARD		B660M Pro RS ASRock £102 This is as cheap as we want to go while still offering room for expansion and upgrades down the line.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 13400F Intel £130 Intel's budget chip is still fantastic value and a solid all-rounder.
GRAPHICS CARD		Radeon RX 9060 XT 8 GB AMD £300 AMD delivers what we need for a 1080p gaming PC at a solid price, at least until even more budget GPU competition arrives.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel Free There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU cooler will work just fine.
MEMORY		T-Force Vulkan Z 16GB Teamgroup £36 8 GB of RAM is simply not enough these days, but 16 GB of speedy DDR4 is much more like it.
POWER SUPPLY		Pure Power 12 750W Be Quiet! £95 This 750W power supply gives you a decent dose of headroom for some future upgrades, from a trusted manufacturer.
SSD		SN7100 1 TB Western Digital £75 Superb 4K read performance for a reasonable price makes this a great drive for any gaming PC, never mind a budget one.
CASE		Zauron Aerocool £32 This Aerocool will let your components breathe and has space for further expansion and cooling.
DISPLAY		Mobiuz EX240 BenQ £150 This BenQ is proof you can buy a genuinely excellent 24in 1080p gaming monitor for not a huge sum of cash nowadays.
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £55 It's actually mind blowing what you can pick up for this little cash: a hot-swappable USB mechanical board that looks lovely.
MOUSE		G305 Lightspeed Logitech £30 Even on a budget you can still grab a fantastic, ultra-rapid wireless squeaker like this one here.
HEADSET		HS55 Stereo Corsair £40 Corsair's budget wired cans are comfy and have a surprisingly excellent microphone for the money.
MOUSE PAD		MM100 Corsair £10 A simple black rectangle that can make a world of difference over no-name models, and it's almost as cheap, too.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,679

MOTHERBOARD		TUF Gaming B650-E Asus £176 A reliable motherboard with plenty of frills, including Wi-Fi 6E, 2.5Gb Ethernet, PCIe 5.0 for the SSD and USB-C on the back.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 7 7700X AMD £270 For the longevity offered by the AM5 socket, we're going for AMD's excellent eight-core Ryzen 7.
GRAPHICS CARD		RTX 5060 Ti Nvidia £450 Nvidia's RTX 50-series cards have been hard to find for good prices, but the 16 GB model is widely available, punchy, and affordable.
COOLER		Peerless Assassin 120 SE Thermaltake £35 It's a big beast, but it brings cooling performance to the table that's undeniably impressive.
MEMORY		Viper Venom DDR5-5600 16 GB Patriot £59 It might not have fancy RGB lighting, but this Patriot RAM certainly has the speed you need for less.
POWER SUPPLY		Pure Power 12 M 750W Be Quiet! £104 This larger Be Quiet! PSU offers a stable platform with PCIe 5.0 connectivity. At 750W, there's room for a GPU upgrade too.
SSD		NM790 2TB Lexar £110 The Lexar proves you can, sometimes, have it all: blazing speeds, cool operation, large capacity and a great price.
CASE		H7 NZXT £100 It's very clever of NZXT to design such an easy PC case to build into, and make it look so gorgeous too.
DISPLAY		PXC277 Advanced Pixio £200 The price of this Pixio, considering the 1440p resolution and 165 Hz refresh rate, is quite something.
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £45 You could spend more for a full-size gaming keyboard, but this G.Skill will certainly suffice for most gamers.
MOUSE		DeathAdder V2 X Hyperspeed Razer £50 The regular V2 is great if you can find one, but this version delivers impeccable gaming performance for less.
HEADSET		Cloud Alpha HyperX £60 We're still not over the awesome audio quality and excellent comfort of the HyperX Cloud Alpha.
MOUSE PAD		G440 Logitech £20 This low-friction hard-top mouse pad with minimal branding offers the smoothest of glides for a reasonable price.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£5,949

MOTHERBOARD		MAG X870E Tomahawk MSI £300 With support for four M.2 drives, huge amounts of DDR5, Wi-Fi 7 and more, this mega mobo is specced to the hilt.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 9 9950X3D AMD £450 The Ryzen 9950X3D has more cores, but it's currently nearly double the price. For gaming? This chip makes much more sense.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 5090 Nvidia £2,200 The RTX 5090 price is ludicrous, but this is a money-no-object build and it's still the fastest GPU you can buy.
COOLER		Galahad II Trinity 360 Lian Li £125 Lian Li's Galahad is all about pure liquid cooling performance and it delivers this flawlessly.
MEMORY		Trident Z5 RGB (2x16GB) G.Skill £115 You could always go for 64 GB if you really want to show off, but 32 GB of speedy DDR5 is still a sweet spot.
POWER SUPPLY		Prime TX-1300 Seasonic £520 The RTX 5090 is a thirsty beast, so you'd better give it a serious power supply – and this one's similarly monstrous.
BOOT DRIVE		NM790 4 TB Lexar £210 With 4TB of storage, it's going to take one seriously big Steam library to get anywhere close to filling this drive up.
MOUSE PAD		Firefly V2 Pro Razer £100 Do you need an RGB mouse mat? If it makes you feel any better it's excellent for flick shots.
CASE		5000D Corsair £139 We swear this stylish mid-tower is bigger on the inside. It's the PC equivalent of the TARDIS.
DISPLAY		ROG Swift OLED PG32UCDM Asus £1,200 You could be much more sensible on your screen than this. For this build, however, we only want the best.
KEYBOARD		ROG Strix Scope II 96 Wireless Asus £170 We're keyboard snobs, and we can say with confidence that this full-sized Asus board is about as good as it gets.
MOUSE		DeathAdder V3 Pro Razer £100 This is the best gaming mouse in our opinion, made better by an incredibly lightweight frame.
HEADSET		Maxwell Audeze £320 Planar magnetic drivers make this headset pure heaven for audio fans. And everyone else, to be honest.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“I picked him up and started turning him into a balloon dog”

POCO made me wear the feeling of being a failed clown like a badge of pride

I feel like clowns are one of the things everyone jumps to saying they're scared of when they're younger. There's just something about them which is off-putting when you're so small, and a lot of the time that carries into adulthood resulting in a grimace whenever you see something clown-adjacent. Luckily I was never plagued with the fear of clowns, so *Poco*, the story of the world's smallest clown, quickly piqued my interest when it popped up on Steam.

After being outcast by the circus, Poco is sent down to a forgotten world littered with random junk and a handful of strange creatures needing help. These creatures, or homunculi as they're referred to in the game, will help you get back to

KARA PHILLIPS



THIS MONTH
Abandoned regular life to run away with the circus.

ALSO PLAYED
REPO, *RuneScape: Dragonwilds*

the circus if you complete tasks for them like making paint, growing flowers, and collecting buttons. The challenges are simple enough, but the winding paths of the Under Growth are easy to get lost amongst.

Despite the simple premise and cutesy appearance of *Poco*, there's something about the whole experience which is deeply unsettling. The game itself isn't dark, in fact the world is pretty colourful and filled with curious creatures which would've made my younger self giggle. But it's the little

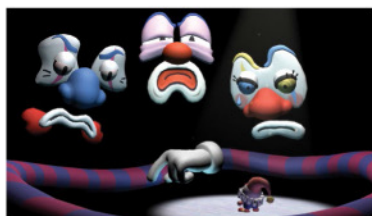
TOP: Absolutely nothing usual to see here.

interactions or sections of the map you only pass through which give the game such an uncomfortable tension.

CLOWNIN' AROUND

While running around trying to find solutions to *Poco*'s puzzles and items to help me get closer to building the rocketship I so desperately needed if I wanted to get back up to the circus, I stumbled upon what looked like a decaying leg stretched across the background. Following the map to the next area, an open ribcage welcomed me in before I realised it was actually the rotting carcass of a clown. The red nose should've been a

I STUMBLED UPON A DECAYING LEG STRETCHED ACROSS THE BACKGROUND



dead giveaway (too soon) which, yes, if you honk it 100 times does unlock one of the hidden Steam achievements. You're welcome.

Another interaction that is bound to stick with me happened while talking to an earthworm enjoying some peace in his cave house. When I walked in and started chatting away to him, he started confiding in me about some back and stomach pains.

So, as any good clown would do, I picked him up and started turning him into a balloon dog. All was well and good, and he was surprised by how much better his new shape made him feel. But when I revisited him later in the game, I was met with a dog-shaped chalk outline and a worm cop stood over him, alongside his inconsolable wife sobbing about what she had to tell the kids.

It's these sorts of moments that really gave the Under Growth, and Poco such a personality. It's not a long game, I mean if it took me an hour and a half to make my way through I don't doubt someone who isn't scouring every location for clues could half that time. But in that hour and a bit I really found a home in the Under Growth, and you know what? Maybe being cast out of the circus wasn't such a bad thing after all. ■



“Turns out flying planes is hard”

Watching my aviation career take off in **AVIASSEMBLY**

▶ RORY NORRIS



THIS MONTH
Created abominations of aviation.

ALSO PLAYED
Doom: The Dark Ages,
Elden Ring: Nightreign.

A *viassembly* is a slightly more casual version of *Euro Truck Simulator* or *SnowRunner*, but instead of sitting behind the wheel of a truck, you're piloting a plane. It's currently in Early Access on Steam, so it's admittedly a bit barebones right now, yet it's perfectly tuned progression system scratches that 'one more go' itch.

My career in aviation didn't begin at flight school, but with a blank canvas. I was immediately thrown into the construction menu and given a few basic parts to play around with: a cockpit, wooden propeller, fuselage block, basic wings and a tail wing. It's just enough to make something that will get in the air to start collecting items at one airstrip and dropping them off at another.

After a few basic jobs, I slowly started unlocking new plane parts through research, and spending my gold to upgrade my plane. However, my first few upgrades weren't fancy new jet engines or massive cargo holds. No, instead I had a few gold to spare on a longer fuselage, letting me carry more items but also making my

plane heavier, harder to control, and much more fuel-hungry.

LIKE A BIRD

That runway, which once seemed needlessly long, was now way too short as the tree line began to scrape the underside of my plane during take-off. And the struggle didn't end once I was in the air, as I quickly realised I needed to counteract the weight of all the goods I thought were wise to bring on board.

This was a never-ending cycle, with an ever more powerful plane being matched by my insatiable appetite for efficiency. It got so dire that at one point, I designed a mutant aircraft that looked like a miniature 747 with two wooden propellers precariously glued to the wings. I didn't have jet engines yet, so I had to make do, OK?

While *Aviassembly* is still a fair way off from release, this Early Access build had me hooked as I worked to upgrade my plane to handle more cargo and further distances. There's plenty of room for it to grow, too, with helicopters, a firefighting mission type, weather, first-person and more custom parts planned for the future. ■



“After King Arthur’s Rammstein-style resurrection ritual, I’m ready to serve”

Bending the knee for **TAINTED GRAIL: THE FALL OF AVALON**’s amnesiac king

In true *Elder Scrolls* style, *Tainted Grail: The Fall of Avalon* plunks you into prison and a suitably gruff, mysterious man comes to your rescue. Sort of. He stabs your interrogator and leaves you to fend for yourself with zero guidance in a labyrinthine plague-addled asylum.

The atmosphere is palpably thick with disease and intrigue, and after some sneaky-ish hijinks, I catch-up with my ‘saviour’, Caradoc. He says he’ll meet me outside at the beach – presumably not for a Mr Whippy. Once again, I’m left fumbling around in the dark and end up unwittingly perusing an erotic novel featuring a fair maiden’s ‘love apples’.

BLOOD PACT

A towering skeletal statue known as a Menhir teleports me to a fractured plane of existence where I embark on a walking tour of the past with the spirit orb of King Arthur. He tells me a lovely bedtime story about how he and Merlin worked to escape the Red Death plague and repel a mystical force known as the Wyrdness. I

▶ EMMA WITHINGTON



THIS MONTH
I made the best, worst decision. Probably.

ALSO PLAYED
Yakuza 0, Clair Obscur: Expedition 33

reenact purging the infected and Arthur emerges atop a pile of corpses – definitely a good guy then. But it’s what came next that got the, uh, blood pumping. Tension rises as the legendary king rests in a bloody, biomechanical Giger-esque tomb where cultists conduct a resurrection ritual. King Arthur’s spiky-crowned form appears before me.

After declaring himself as the fabulous founder of Camelot with amnesia, he dissipates back to a nebulous blob. To restore his glorious form, Arthur must reclaim his scattered soul fragments and I’m the

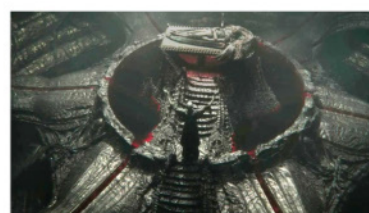
overeager squire for hire. Until then, my soul will shuffle up so he can hitch a ride. Back in reality, Caradoc was waiting by a getaway skiff at the beach. Without hesitation, I deny that anything interesting happened – even under increasingly suspicious circumstances, like reappearing miraculously cured. What’s a King Arthur? Red Death? Completed it, mate. After deft deflection, Caradoc reveals his quest to destroy Arthur.

Barely reunited, a storm separates me from Caradoc en route to the mainland of Avalon. Never mind. I remain faithful to my – probably evil – king. After some time, I’m jumpscared by Caradoc again – who I’d all but forgotten existed. He chides me for lying, saying that I’d be cream cheese without him. Turns out, he’s known all along that Arthur boarded me and proceeds to shout at my chest in the hope that Arthur will hear his threats. Unfortunately for him – and everyone else – I’ve pledged allegiance to the amnesiac king, no matter the outcome. This is probably the worst possible decision, but after witnessing Arthur’s Rammstein-style resurrection ritual, I’m ready to serve. ■

ARTHUR MUST RECLAIM HIS SCATTERED SOUL FRAGMENTS AND I’M THE SQUIRE FOR HIRE



The definition of hero worshipping.



LEFT: Ooga-Chaka
Ooga-Ooga
Ooga-Chaka!

BELOW: I live to serve.



Well, that man really hates me. That much is clear. It’s good you didn’t tell him we’ve met, young one. Who knows what he’d have done.



I don't know if it's Vulkan that's doing it, but *Dark Ages* runs like silk.

“Doom Eternal turned you into a kind of armoured wasp”

Playing **DOOM: THE DARK AGES** is an opportunity to slow down, and marvel at the graphics tech

Do you remember *Doom 3*? When it came out, all jagged, inky black shadows and mutterings from players about being a survival horror game rather than a straight shooter, it took *Doom* and slowed it down. Rather than just blowing things away with weapons you started to worry about imps lunging at you from the darkness, and the Cyberdemon was huge.

Doom: The Dark Ages reminds me of *Doom 3* in a way. It's come after two fast-paced shooters but slows things down a bit. It pits you against enormous foes surprisingly early in its storyline even before you've reached the strange dodging and punching game that is using the Atlus mech. And it takes advantage of the latest in rendering technology, just as *Doom 3* did with id Tech 4's then novel normal mapping, specular highlighting and real-time lighting.

Dark Ages' id Tech 8 is a huge advance over 2004's game engine. It can do the soft shadows and global

IAN EVENDEN



THIS MONTH
Gazed at ray-traced lighting on demon guts.

ALSO PLAYED
Indiana Jones and the Great Circle, *Fallen Aces*

illumination that id Tech 4 couldn't, and it uses the Vulkan API rather than OpenGL. And this means that, on my PC at least, it runs like absolute greased lightning.

SMOOTHLY DOES IT

There has been much talk of *Dark Ages* slowing the Slayer down so he's a tank rather than a fighter jet, and frankly I prefer it. It's nowhere near as slow as *Doom 3*, even the shader compilation is hidden behind loading screens, and by using some of

Nvidia's latest frame-gen tricks I can approach my monitor's 180fps max.

Which, when you think about it, is absurd. Am I getting three times the experience I would from 60fps? I am not. I don't think I can even tell the difference once the framerate climbs that high. But what's remarkable is how smooth an experience it all is. We've become used to games that involve ray tracing being slower due to the extra processing power required of your GPU, even if it has specialised cores to take care of the additional maths.

But *Doom: The Dark Ages* doesn't do this, it just flies along as long as you're not trying to run it on a Steam Deck or any kind of graphics hardware without ray-tracing capabilities. Its gameplay may feel slower than that of *Doom Eternal*, which turned you into a kind of armoured wasp running rings around the demons of Hell, but *Dark Ages* is beautiful and knows it – watch the skull-crusher gun in action for a proof of this – and wants you to pause occasionally to enjoy the view. It's worth it. ■

IT CAN DO THE SHADOWS AND GLOBAL ILLUMINATION THAT ID TECH 4 COULDN'T

TWO POINT MUSEUM

More like 'Two point-Ooooooh!' *By Jess Kinghorn*

The Japanese language dub came out shortly before this column's main event, but as a series first, it's worth a few spotlighting sentences... though I'm calling attention to it simply to highlight the fact voice actress Saki Fujita performs the dry tannoy announcements. That's right: in Japanese, quips about bones and crowbars are delivered by none other than the human voice of Miku Hatsune – and I, for one, can't wait to see what the Steam Workshop tinkerers do with that nugget of knowledge.

Moving on to the headline act, *Two Point Museum* is finally unearthing its chunky 2.0 update. Momentous for more reasons than the name alone, this update introduces a number of changes to how curators manage their museum's staff, security and decor.

After all, what's the point of perfecting tour routes and piling on the buzz if your wallpaper clashes horribly with your flooring? Twenty-three new walls and floors are introduced here, including a selection of snow-themed additions that ensure your frozen exhibits finally look a little frostier.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
March 4, 2025

DEVELOPER
Two Point Studios

PUBLISHER
Sega

LINK
twopointstudios.com

But just as we all know 'any curator with a sizeable museum must be in want of some new decor options', it also holds true that if you want deep-pocketed collectors to come a-knocking, you must also prepare for thieves. As such, the 2.0 update significantly rebalances the behaviour of sticky-fingered visitors, while also equipping your security staff with a few more bits of kit for dealing with them.

For starters, a free-standing 360° camera allows your camera room operative to see a wider chunk of your museum. On top of that, you can now place the outside camera inside, and a whole new filtering tab has been added so you don't have to go spelunking for security items to buy. What's more, guests with itchy fingers now don't run away at the mere sight of surveillance.

Thieves now run slower than before, giving your guards a chance to catch up. Tunnelling-types of thieves known as Molars also won't

grab the first exhibit within reach of their burrow, affording a hope of catching them before they go back underground again.

KEEPING THE DAY JOB

To balance against all of these improvements, patrolling security guards now have to contend with Tunnel Vision, a new staff trait that narrows their field of view, to balance against this. There are 14 new staff traits in all, both positive and negative, for your employees to rock up with – so let me tell you about one recent hire.

It's generally bad practice to hire someone based solely on their name,

REBALANCES THE BEHAVIOUR OF ANY STICKY-FINGERED VISITORS

but *Two Point Museum* makes it so easy. I hired Peggy Nutt who began her employment at my fine establishment with almost no skills to her name, but oh, was her starting salary low. She's had quite the career since: between supply runs for my gift shop and working the ticket booths, she's been a perhaps unlikely asset on expeditions.

Peggy is in possession of the new Jammy trait, making her immune to MIA events like hellholes and man-eating plants – which is just as well as I send out my expeditioners in pursuit of Pristine exhibits I can flog to stave off bankruptcy.

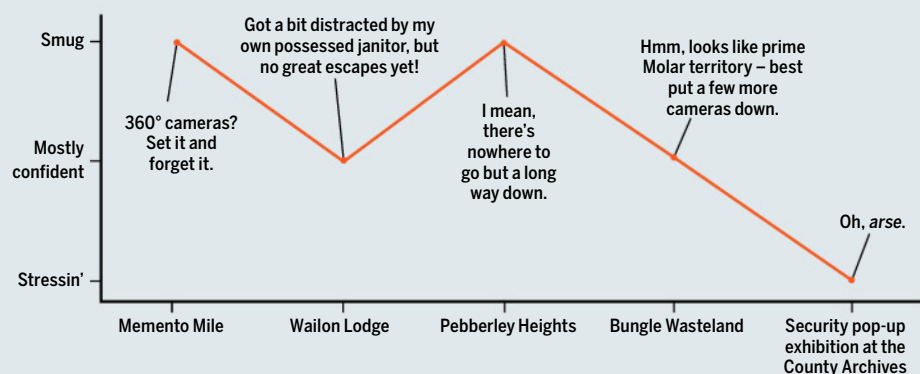
Unfortunately, Peggy lacks either the new Shatterproof or Antibacterial traits, meaning she's still catching illnesses and getting injured just like everyone else.

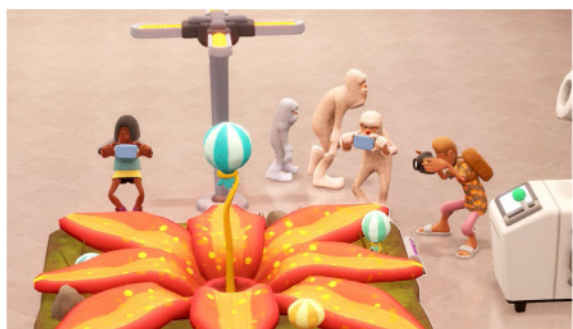
Thankfully, new staff room items may ensure she kicks the can of resignation down the road just a bit longer; the microwave will see to all of your employees fishy food needs, ensuring your team stays fuller for longer, while the staff desk bestows cat videos and a little trickle of experience points alike.

Truly, my museum is the best and the worst thing to ever happen to Peggy Nutt. And as the option for extra large UI elements means I can now comfortably keep track of the arc of her career on both my desktop and Steam Deck, there is no escape.

SELF SECURE

My confidence capturing thieves post-update





ABOVE: Security enjoys a number of tweaks, including a 360° camera forever scoping out your museum.

FAR LEFT: Remembering where you dug up an exhibit being eyed by a collector is now easier than ever – just inspect it!



That old-school UI might look ugly, but once you give it a chance, it's... still pretty ugly.



DAGGERFALL UNITY

The definitive way to journey through the boldest version of Tamriel. *By Justin Wagner*

The *Elder Scrolls 4: Oblivion Remastered* is all the rage right now, and that makes sense. *Oblivion* is the first blockbuster take on Tamriel, rife with celebrity cameos, handcrafted world-spanning quest lines and streamlined buildcrafting (for 2006, anyway). I love *Oblivion*, and I played it long before I ever tried *Daggerfall*, a game that barely functioned on my PC by the time I'd taken an interest. Crusty as it might look in 2025, though, *Daggerfall* still stands tall as one of the wildest and most absorbing simulation RPGs in the genre. Fans like mod author Interkarma couldn't let it fade into obscurity; so mods came to the rescue.

Enter *Daggerfall Unity*. It's a meticulous open-source recreation of the second *Elder Scrolls* game in

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Dec 23, 2023

DEVELOPER
Interkarma

PUBLISHER
Interkarma

LINK
dfworkshop.net

the Unity engine. It's the original game note for note, but with more intuitive controls, touched-up visuals, mod support, and draw distances that show off just how gargantuan the game is.

SECOND LIFE

If you're not sure if *Daggerfall* is for you, consider this: have you ever wanted to speak to a dragon in an *Elder Scrolls* game? I'm not talking about the Thu'um: in *Daggerfall*, you can speak Dragonish for a chance that dragon enemies will understand you and not attack you. You can also buy a personal boat, get a bank loan that scales with your level and reputation,



HIGHLIGHT REEL

Daggerfall Unity's best improvements**DRAW DISTANCE**

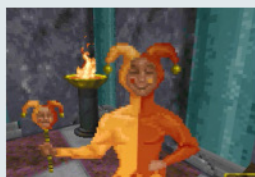
The extra clarity afforded by Unity's draw distance – a tenfold increase from the base game – struck me like a lightning bolt.

**COMBAT CONTROL**

Unity's built-in auto-attack feature will let you sidestep the controls of the original; simply click and hold to hack and slash.

**LUX DELUXE**

The way torches glow and campfires burn in *Daggerfall Unity* ultimately won me over. It's optional, but give it a chance.

**CONSOLE GENERATION**

I love playing *Daggerfall* with an Xbox controller, and Unity's support is so robust you could beat the game on a Steam Deck.

and adjust your conversational etiquette to talk down your nose at whoever you like. Moreso than any other *Elder Scrolls* game, *Daggerfall* is a through-and-through fantasy life simulator. *Unity* is just the best way to play it.

Where a remaster like *Oblivion's* takes a game that's familiar and playable and soups it up with cutting-edge visuals and incremental refinements, *Daggerfall Unity* takes a game that struggles to run on modern machines and helps it feel slick and intuitive without compromising the original's feel – except when it makes sense, of course.

For instance, the original *Daggerfall* has you moving the camera with keyboard keys; this was before *Quake* players started spreading the good news of a WASD-movement standard. Mouse look is an optional setting, and given that you swing a sword in this game by dragging your mouse around, it quickly turns cumbersome. The target resolution is a gruesome 320x200 and, like any Bethesda game to follow, it's crawling with bugs.

Unity trades all that with a default control scheme pretty close to *Skyrim's*, widescreen and ultrawide resolution support, bug fixes and so on. It goes even further to improve enemy combat AI, adds dynamic lighting and shadows to spell particles, and implements full controller support. That latter point means that *Daggerfall Unity* is quietly a prime candidate for play on a Steam Deck or similar handheld.

Nearly every new addition the mod adds can also be disabled if you decide you'd rather play the game as close to its original incarnation as possible, and you'll still inherit the enhanced performance and system compatibility that comes with a *Unity* overhaul. That out-of-the-box playability makes this remake positively frictionless, which is hardly common when revisiting DOS games.

FINALLY AWAKE

But hey, maybe you want the latest and greatest take on *Daggerfall* with all sorts of fanmade additions – or maybe you'd even like to try tinkering with the game yourself. No problem: *Unity* also makes the game tantalisingly modifiable, so it's easier than ever to tweak any given slice of the game until it's to your liking.

On the release blog for *Daggerfall*

Unity, author Interkarma recommends a slew of featured mods for anyone looking to build out the game. JehutySpeaks' *Quest Pack 1* adds nearly 200 new quests to discover, KingOfWormsDFU's *DREAM* is an ambitious graphical overhaul, and Hazelnut's *Archaeologists* adds a completely original guild that leverages language skills with an Indiana Jones-y twist.

Perhaps the most welcome substantial change is the built-in setting to limit dungeon size. By default, *Daggerfall* applies procedural generation with all the restraint of a golden retriever left alone with a meat lover's pizza. Most dungeons are consequently winding nightmare labyrinths; while they are always completable, theoretically, they go on for absolutely ages which

**A THROUGH-AND-THROUGH FANTASY LIFE SIMULATOR**

makes hunting for random quest objects a major chore. The smaller dungeon setting limits generation to a handful of modest blocks, while leaving hand-crafted dungeons untouched. It trims a huge amount of the game's fat and it's really hard to imagine going back to the way things were.

I'll continue to play both *Oblivion Remastered* and *Daggerfall Unity*. They both galvanise excellent, ageing RPGs with a modern sensibility and tighter hack-and-slash action. But if I had to give a 'most improved' award to either remake, *Unity* takes it. I shudder to think I might never have properly experienced one of the most lush and influential games this side of the MS-DOS era were it not for Interkarma's generous fix-up.

At a time when most games from that era are borderline unplayable or impossible to snag legally without hunting down a physical copy on eBay, *Daggerfall* is lucky to have such an enthusiastic and proactive community working toward its preservation. Given the community germinating around mods within the mod, it seems like it'll enjoy that deserved attention for a long time. ■



ABOVE: The melee combat sure has aged, but that's no excuse to start running.

RIGHT: If you thought *Oblivion's* conversation wheel was a hoot, just wait.





SURVIVE ARRAKIS IN DUNE: AWAKENING

It's a cruel place, so here's how to make dune life easier. *By Rory Norris*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Medium

TIME
Your first few hours

VITAL LINKS

Trainer locations:
pcgamer.com/games/mmo/dune-awakening-trainer-locations

Trial of aql locations:
pcgamer.com/games/mmo/dune-awakening-trial-of-aql-locations



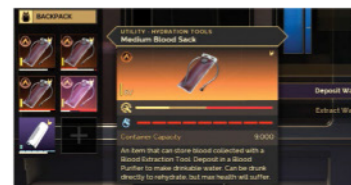
CREATING A SURVIVOR

1 You're given three scary choices right away: your homeworld, caste, and mentor. The first two aren't important but your mentor is your starting class. Pick Mentat for a powerful turret. The second-best class, Trooper, is the first one you can unlock later, anyhow.



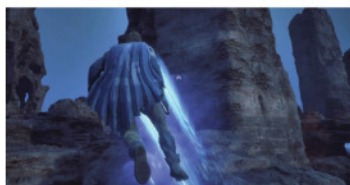
TRAINING MONTAGE

2 You can unlock the remaining classes by visiting basic and advanced trainers. You can easily unlock Trooper at Griffin's Reach tradeport, Planetologist above Imperial Testing Station No 2, Mentat in Riftwatch, and Bene Gesserit in Helius Gate.



BECOME A VAMPIRE

3 Newsflash: surviving on Arrakis is thirsty work. Water is hard to come by and harder to conserve; Stillsuits help, but it's not enough to avoid dehydration. Craft blood bags and a needle, and head to the closet enemy camp to drain them and fuel blood purifiers.



GET EMPEROR'S WINGS

4 The threat of dehydration, sunstroke, and sandworms makes speed and efficiency key, but open dunes and rocky crags get in the way. Look no further than Emperor's Wings, a unique schematic from Imperial Testing Station No 2, which lets you fly.



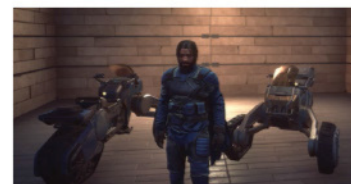
DITCH THE STILLSUIT

5 Once you've embraced the vampire lifestyle with upgraded bloodbags and literjon bottle, it's time to trade the Stillsuit for actual armour. Enemies in later regions are much more deadly, and a Stillsuit just won't cut it.



SPICE TRIPS

6 Completing the Trial of Aql questline might seem like an optional task at times, but it's key to your progression. Figure out where they are and overcome them to earn new schematics and the ability to consume spice.



PARK IN SHELTER

7 Vehicles are lifesavers, but they're fragile. Getting shot or crashing is annoying, but braving a sandstorm is a death sentence. To avoid getting stranded, park in a sheltered area (it'll say above your healthbar) and build a makeshift garage at your base.

1
MENTAT MAYHEM
Sit back and relax by picking the Mentat mentor in the character creator. You can easily take out camps with a turret and a gas grenade while you wait out the carnage.

2
STAY SHELTERED
Shelter is incredibly important on the dunes, protecting yourself and any vehicles from vicious sandstorms. Hide between rocks, park in a crevice, and build a fully sealed house for safety.

3
IT'S AN MMORPG
Dune: Awakening is much closer to an MMORPG than a survival game, so don't overlook quests. Completing main quests unlocks new areas and items, while contracts give you valuable resources.

THE WRECK OF THE ALCYON
The Right of Salvage

- Travel to the shipwreck
- Gather Plasteel Microflora Fiber (10)
- Gather Mechanical parts (2)

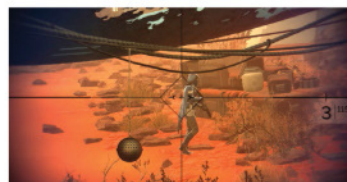
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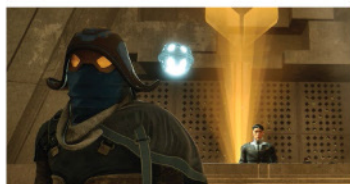
8 Another way to avoid getting stranded out in the desert is to store your ride using a vehicle backup tool. While stored, it won't be exposed to the elements, and it's also the only way to bring a vehicle back with you while fast-travelling.



9 Base-building can get confusing, not least because you need a bunch of different materials, some of which require processing first. Save yourself some brainpower by placing projections, plans of what you want to build, if you're not ready to commit to it.



10 You'll quickly notice how annoyingly common shield enemies are in later areas; you can't shoot them, so you're forced to awkwardly poke them with a knife. Get around this by clearing bases from a distance, starting with melee enemies.



11 It's a lawless planet with no public services, but the emperor demands pocket money. Your sub-fief console shows how much you owe, then take an ornithopter taxi to Arrakeen or Harko Village to pay it off – or risk a Sardukar raid.



12 Your journal can be intimidating once it gets clogged up with requests, from trainer missions to tradepost contracts, but it's worth checking in regularly. Beating contracts gives you everything from solaris to XP.



BEING CHARMING IN VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES

PART 4

He's good with his fists, but is our fledgling's charisma up to snuff? *By Ian Evenden*

Cyprian Maggard may be the luckiest fledgling vampire ever to be embraced, and that's without a luck stat even appearing on his character sheet. Not only has he made it to an unprecedented fourth diary entry, but he's disobeyed an order from a vampire prince, killed a lot of people he said he wouldn't (and which is not going to look good if night ever ends and the day shift arrives at the museum he butchered his way through) and lost the (presumably) priceless artefact he was tasked with retrieving.

Instead of taking it out on him, however, the vampire prince is angry at someone else. Phew. Not only this, but he continues to trust the red-trousered fop to act as his agent, dispatching him to Hollywood to continue the search for the Ankarani Sarcophagus, which he believes to have fallen into the hands of the Nosferatu, a clan of disfigured sewer dwellers who trade in information.

Hollywood, it turns out, is an oddly run-down place quite unlike the glitzy image projected through the movie industry. It's run by an Anarch baron named Isaac, and he demands I meet with him as soon as I set foot on his streets. Cyprian is polite and respectful, and gets away without being eaten alive, and with a quest to pick up a videotape from a courier. Sounds easy.

While walking away from the encounter with Isaac, Cyprian is jumped by a woman named Samantha. She knows him from the days before he was a vampire – time must have passed since the fateful night that led to his current predicament, but since the sun never comes up, and he never needs to sleep, we don't know how much. He's unable to persuade her to forget all about it, and she's determined to make calls to bring all his pre-vampire friends running to help... which would be a Masquerade violation. He's able to use his vampiric Presence ability to prevent her from picking up the payphone (like many movie, TV and game plots set slightly before we all had phones in our pockets, *VTMB* would be completely ruined by easy communication) and she just wanders off. I suspect we'll see her again.

Unnerved by this encounter, Cyprian returns to his apartment Downtown, where he intends to drink some

blood from Heather, his ghoul, and recharge his powers. She has other ideas, however, as it turns out she's brought home a man who wouldn't leave her alone, and locked him in the bathroom ready to act as an unwilling meal. For some reason, he has to pick the lock of his own internal door to get in, but once he does the guy is a dick so gets fed upon – but not killed.

Heather takes him out while he's still in a post-feeding trance, to get rid of him. Cyprian isn't quite sure what that means, and is left with the feeling he should have killed him, just to tie up a potential loose end, despite the loss of Humanity this would cause.

THERE'S NO WAY HE CAN USE HIS SPEECH SKILLS AGAINST THE LIVING DEAD

ACTION MOVIE

So the quest for the missing tape continues, and Maggard tracks down the courier, who's cowering in an alleyway. It seems he's watched the tape, which seems like a really bad idea, and is now convinced he's being followed by creatures in the shadows.

He may be right, as after he runs away there's the sound of a manhole cover closing just around the corner, and when Maggard gets there he's gone. Poor guy. It's one thing to be fed upon by a snappily dressed charmer with glorious hair, and quite another to be pulled into the muck by a creature that looks like the offspring of a rat and a brick wall.

The clue he leaves behind is 'Ginger Swan', and this turns out to be the name of a deceased actress buried in the nearby cemetery. Maggard gains access through a hole in the wall, and while on his way to the mausoleum runs into the caretaker. Somehow, he ends up roped into looking after the place for five minutes, while his new vampire friend takes care of some unspecified 'business'. How hard can it be?

Quite hard, it turns out, as Cyprian isn't really combat-specced apart from with his fists. The objective is to keep zombies, which are suddenly everywhere, away from the two gates (completely overlooking the hole in the wall he entered through) by shooting them in the head.

It's a rare failure for Maggard – there's no way he can use his speech skills against the living dead, so he resorts to punching, and there are too many of them. It's close, but they get the gate open with a second or two left on the timer, which means the caretaker gets cross with me and I don't get a reward.

In the crypt, vampire perception highlights the correct place to look with a spooky blue glow, and before too long the videotape is safely in Cyprian's possession. It's called Horror Tape Part 1, which makes it pretty clear this isn't actually the end of the questline.

THE RULES

1. Don't kill innocents.
2. Don't fight: scheme and manipulate instead.
3. Avoid losing humanity as much as possible.



None of the locales are particularly varied – they just contain different quests.

➤ SNUFF AND NONSENSE

The hunt for part two of the tape, the first half of which shows a woman being pursued and killed by vicious two-legged creatures, leads Cyprian to a porn shop, and \$500 later to a payphone, then a motel, then an internet cafe. This is a curious artefact of the time the game was made – a place with PCs (and CRT monitors) where you could go and pay to surf the net for a while, instead of having 24/7 access on a device in your pocket. It was a different era, a more innocent time, perhaps a better one as the horrors of the internet comment section hadn't yet become normalised.

The internet cafe turns out to be a front for adult movie-making (rather than the more obvious DVD shop or the two strip clubs in Hollywood) and is infested with the same creatures that Cyprian saw on the tape. He ends up fighting his way through them, which yet again underlines the game's obsession with combat, though they do explode satisfyingly when beaten.

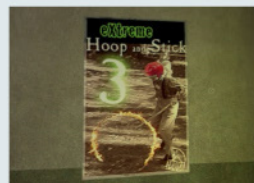
The adult movie sets are a mix of bedrooms, a mattress by a dumpster, and a somewhat incongruous stuffed zebra, but downstairs is where the really nasty stuff is made. A man he meets there tells Cyprian about a spooky house in the hills, which sounds like somewhere he's bound to end up, before being killed. He takes the tape and returns it to Isaac.

There's a lot of sex on display in *VTMB*'s version of Hollywood. It's being used to give the game an 'adult' tone, but largely falls flat. There's nothing alluring about flesh-coloured polygons, even today when they'd be ray-traced and textured and anti-aliased to be as realistic as possible. When your stripper resembles a sack of potatoes on legs, even when they're the very best potatoes the rendering techniques of 20 years ago could manage, then it lacks even the barest (pun intended) connection to reality.

The horror content in *VTMB* works so much better than the sex stuff, because when you want to be spooky you can cloak it in shadows and moody lighting, the half-seen becoming twice as effective. Thanks to the nature of the strip clubs and adult movie theatres of *VTMB*'s locations, there's no subtlety, and everything is on display under harsh lighting that reveals every flaw.

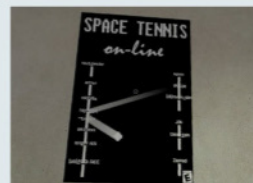
VAMPIRE THE VIDEOGAMER

What's playing on VTMB's game machines?



EXTREME HOOP AND STICK 3

A prequel to previous titles, *EHAS3* tells the story of how the Hoopmaster met the Stickdude. 70%



SPACE TENNIS ONLINE

The ultimate MMO. What if you could play *Pong* with randoms, batting the ball back and forth all day? 97%



PARK RANGERS

It's not clear if you're killing dogs, bears or tourists here, but what the heck, go after all three. 82%



VTMB: BLOOD GUNNER

An FPS reimagining of *VTMB*. It's the game the RPG really wants to be, with lots of violence. 35%

You can even ask Heather to walk around your apartment in her panties if you want to, though this does seem degrading for someone Cyprian has tried his best to protect... so he asks her to dress like a goth instead.

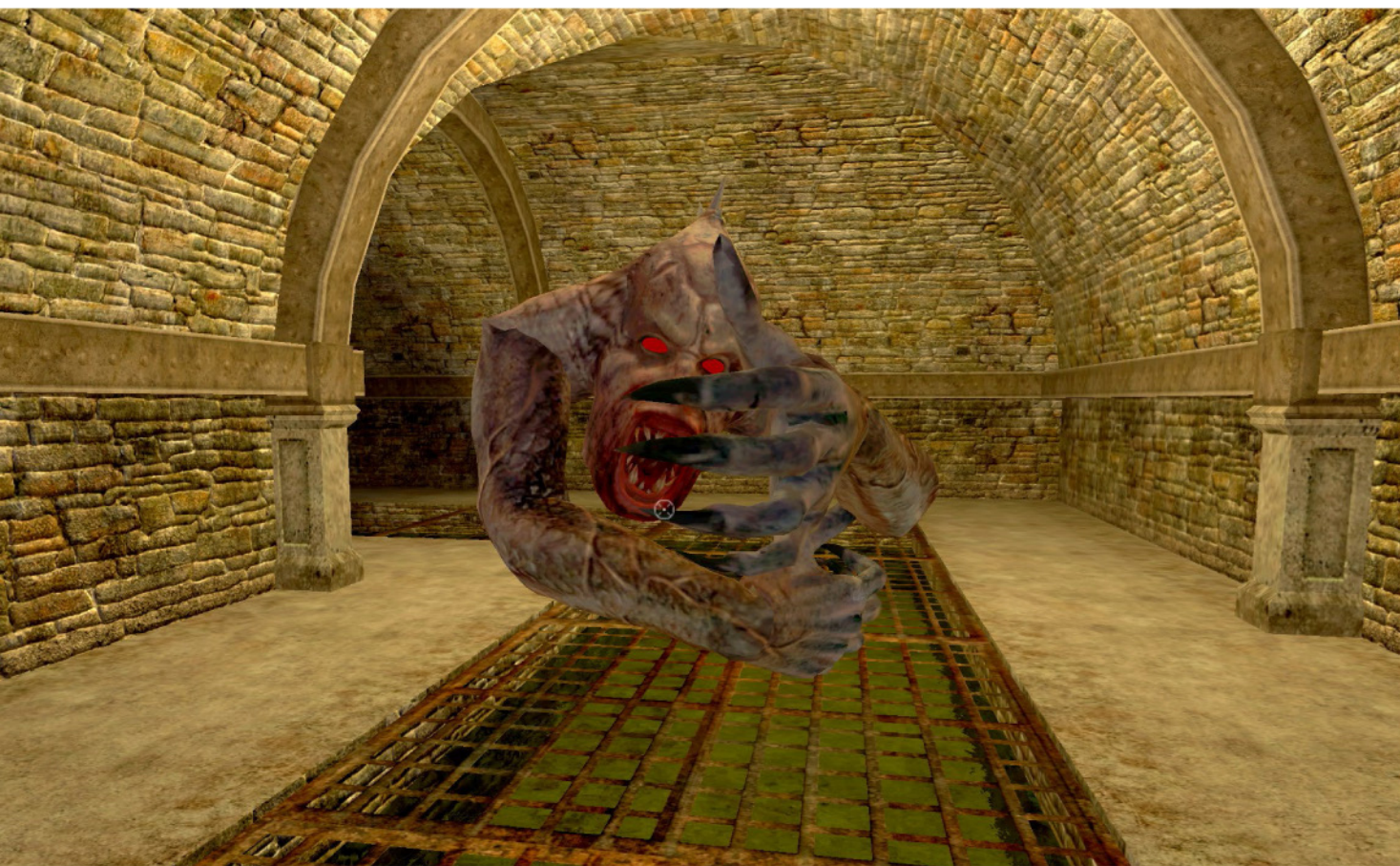
THE HILLS HAVE AIIIIIS

Isaac recognises the location from the snuff tape, and sends Cyprian there just as was prophesied. He goes in expecting another haunted house level like the Ocean Hotel, but instead gets a lot of concrete and the second drained swimming pool he's noticed since being in Hollywood – the first being at the motel. Do vampires not swim, or does the game not have the rendering budget for water effects? We'll never know.

The house is modern and austere on the outside, but is a nightmare within. Flesh and blood drips from the walls, there are bones embedded in the walls, and those familiar two-legged creatures burst through the doors and attack – they're oddly dull for monsters we're seeing so much of, as they're a kind of dark brown, only have two limbs, and don't show their faces much. Worst of all is the furniture, which seems to have been created from body parts. It's a lot to take in.

In the basement Cyprian encounters Andrei, a Sabbat member of the Tzimisce clan and the one who's been making all the chairs and monsters out of flesh. He's an





WORST OF ALL IS THE FURNITURE, WHICH HAS BEEN CREATED FROM BODY PARTS

interesting-looking guy: the lore claims that Tzimisce use their flesh-sculpting skills on themselves, so the fact he has a head like some sort of creature glimpsed for a second in a submarine's searchlights may not be his natural appearance. He's well dressed in red, speaks with an eastern European accent, and he wants to fight.

It's a typical boss battle. Andrei has a large health bar, sinks into the floor only to reappear somewhere else, and summons monsters that attack Cyprian so that he can't concentrate on the big bad. He doesn't carry out any attacks himself, and doesn't react to being punched beyond the health bar chipping away, so eventually he can be beaten into the floor by Cyprian's fists. Having a ranged weapon speciality would have helped here, as he's teleporting across the room.

Then once he's dead, he's just sort of gone, and doesn't even leave any good loot behind. What follows is a combat-heavy trip through the sewers in search of the Nosferatu. It's all identical corridors and monsters jumping out at you, and isn't a good fit for Cyprian's skillset.

What at first seemed like a game in which it would be possible to

smoothly talk my way out of situations has become a vampire-themed shooter, and I suspect it's only going to get more so. It's probably great fun if you pop all your points into Perception and Intelligence for the ranged combat feats and improved aiming. The game gives you a pistol and shotgun pretty quickly, there's a Glock laying next to a corpse in the sewer that's a pretty clear clue to what's coming. Talking your way through every situation is only possible in games if the developers have left the door open for it, and all too often *VTMB* slams it shut in a hail of bullets.

Despite this, Cyprian Maggard has spent his time sucking up to a prince, worrying about Heather, and generally being treated as a servant by everyone he meets. There's been a lot of punching in the face too, and the fantasy of the impossibly charismatic vampire is very hard to act out when all you're expected to do is fight. ■

ABOVE: There are hundreds of these in the sewers, attacking everything that moves.





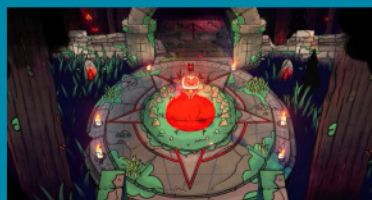
WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

LITTLE GUYS

Friends come in all shapes and sizes

By Kara Phillips



FAR LEFT: Just two little guys in a big, big world.



I couldn't tell you the first time I saw a character in a game and immediately fell in love with it thanks to its character design. I've probably shared my opinions on thousands of little critters over the years without really knowing what makes them so appealing to me. There's just something about this style that I simply cannot get enough of. If there's a little guy involved in it somewhere, there's probably me cheering it on.

To me, 'little guy' is a fairly broad term. It generally refers to smaller characters with a notable energy around them, but the details are definitely up to the individual. For me, my favourite little guys don't even have to be cute, just endearing in their own ways. Even if they don't show any deep personality.

SIZE DOESN'T MATTER

Generally, these characters may be small in size, but their role in games tend to be much, much larger. They tend to play a significant part in games which overlook their size. For example, Ooblets from *Ooblets* are the dictionary definition of little guys, but they are essential to the whole experience. I mean, the game is literally named after them. You grow them from seeds, and then send them out into dance battles around the town or use them as an extra pair of hands around your house. Not only are they your key to making any sort of progression, these little guys are the backbone of the whole game.

They don't even need to be innocent characters to be classed as a little guy. The Lamb from *Cult of the Lamb* is a member of this club, but saying that character is innocent is far from the truth. They run a cult in the woods, indoctrinating innocent woodland animals they've saved from slaughter along the way. On paper

SMALL BUT MIGHTY

Look out for the little guy



**TUD
OOBLET**

Big eyes – not a single thought behind them.

Tiny body – makes up for this in the size of their noggin.

Not quite an alien, not quite a frog – literally what is it.

Look at those legs – can they walk very far on those things?



**THE LAMB
CULT OF THE LAMB**

Massive head – definitely not full of evil thoughts.

Look at that face – no face with that expression could be evil.

Little limbs – no creature of that size could wield a weapon.

Rounded features – not a sharp angle in sight!

this sounds sweet, but they are also responsible for a lot of bloodshed, alongside essentially brainwashing their cult members and punishing those who retaliate. Despite all this, they are still classed as a little guy, there's no doubt about it.

Playing such significant parts in whatever story definitely helps me

THEY DON'T EVEN NEED TO BE INNOCENT CHARACTERS TO BE CLASSED AS A LITTLE GUY

love and appreciate the little guy more. Whether that's for good or for evil. It's easy to praise something so visually appealing, but when these creatures and characters are putting their lives on the line to help us, or others, you can't not love them.

This isn't always the case though. Little guys don't need to serve a purpose just to fit into the category. A lot of the time, little guys are mainly

there for visual appeal anyway. It doesn't make them any less important. Just because they're not running into battle or leading the party doesn't mean they don't have a part to play. Even if that part is just being a treat for the eyes. I tend to find myself appreciating the look of a character before I appreciate what comes next, which probably says a lot about me as a person, but still.

CUTE TO BOOT

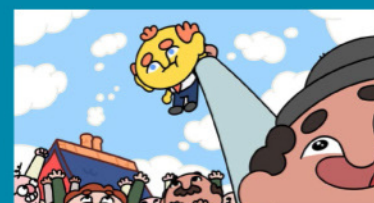
It certainly helps that little guys, or at least my description of them, tend to follow the same pattern when it comes to design. Aside from taking their label literally and being small in scale compared to either the environment, or the characters inhabiting it, there are a few features that immediately push themselves under this description thanks to how they are built. It can't be helped, they were just born this way.

From my extensive research, more often than not little guys will have enlarged features of some sort, be it eyes, ears, or even their entire head, paired with much smaller limbs or just a smaller body. Unless, of course, you're talking about a Poro which is definitely a member of the little guy club, but is essentially just a cloud of fluff with no discernible features besides its face and four teeny tiny legs. It's important to note that this appearance doesn't apply to all little guys, it's just a guideline.

To me, this shout and stout character model gives off the impression that a character will be weaker in some sense due to their out of proportion appearance, and it's our job as a player to protect them. There's something so innocent about the appearance of little guys, you can't help feeling like you have to take them under your wing. Even when they are the characters causing you the most issue, or they prove themselves as not as innocent as they look. They're just little guys. ■



LEFT: Pondering the weight of the world when you are such a little guy.





REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES



Impressive visual
effects, nostalgic
audio and fan-
favourite heroes



STAR WARS: BATTLEFRONT II

Winning back players one planet at a time. *By Kyle Hoekstra*

Rebel hero Lando Calrissian leads a handful of troopers through the gloomy corridors of an imperial base, backgrounded by wailing sirens, blaster fire and the odd Wilhelm scream. He vanishes around a corner, from which emerges a volley of lasers skittering over the polished floors and up the walls like confetti, and then nothing at all. I glimpse a heap of corpses, Lando among them, before a red lightsaber flies out and shreds me too. I don't remember this bit in the films.

I've re-enlisted in the Star Wars. Specifically those underway in *Star Wars: Battlefront II*, Dice's 2017 shooter which in 2025 has seen a surprise revival. Its launch was rocky to say the least. Controversy over its

multiplayer's microtransaction model overtook hype for the game itself and led to loot crate mechanics becoming a topic of mainstream discussion. The negative reaction found an exposed target in the fairly serviceable singleplayer. Cartoon stink lines were left wafting over the whole endeavour.

Dice set to work winning back its players. In the long run, this seems to have worked. Eight years later, *Battlefront II* is setting itself new Steam player records. This is in the wake of a new Star Wars miniseries, the 20th anniversary celebration of *Revenge of the Sith*, and a social media campaign asking EA to make *Battlefront III*. I'm having a good time with it, too. The monetisation mess was ditched and 25 free updates followed. With that tidied up, what's left?

TOP: Moments before Obi-Wan Kenobi is humiliated by a droid.

LIGHT AND MAGIC

Battlefront's take on Star Wars crystallises around impressive visual effects, nostalgic audio and fan-favourite heroes, but is less precise an experience the farther you drift in loyalty from the Jedi Temple. The production values are sublime. The reflection of lasers and lightsabers shimmer in Kamino's puddles and on Hoth's ice. Foliage responds to your bulky armour in a satisfying way, and bodies ragdoll amusingly in the whirlwind of a force push. Iconic sounds, pulled from the films and recorded anew, telegraph the positions of allies and enemies and

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2017

PUBLISHER
EA

DEVELOPER
Dice

LINK
ea.com



paint evocative soundscapes of different locations.

Handled properly, such established material ought to give the high ground to any spin-off game. Dice land it all splendidly. Most of all, they want you to feel cosy in the universe Lucasfilm have helped you to imagine. When the action itself is prosaic – a repetitive ground battle of capturing and recapturing points – you are consoled by being immersed in a fabulous Star Wars-themed distraction. But dare I say it, high-fidelity clone trooper helmets and meticulously air-worked Death Star hangers take it only so far.

GALACTIC ARCADE

You may read all that and be like, “The main events are the large-scale battles of Galactic Assault and Supremacy.” These games of ground warfare proceed through phases, the latter culminating with one side emerging victorious after sabotaging their opponents’ capital ship. Forty players fight in these modes, but making up further numbers are AI-controlled units. These bulk up the sense of scale while yielding a few easy targets for newer players.

Despite sharing DNA with the *Battlefield* series through developer

Dice, this isn’t a tactical simulation. The blaster you’ll use most of the time is an imprecise tool. Scoped weapons are more accurate, but it’ll always take a few blasts on target to shatter a player’s robust health bar. Besides a handful of abilities and an active reload cribbed from *Gears of War*, interaction is simplified.

Controls are a step more imprecise when using a controller, and yet this

is my preferred way of playing – if only for the moments when I hop into a starfighter. It also seems to suit the arcade spirit of the game, which easily sustains sporadic play by encouraging your quick return to action, over and over, each time you’re slain by a Sith lord or humbled by a droid.

There is a resulting flatness to the arcade experience. There are few opportunities for those self-directed stories which emerge from more sandbox games, like sneaking behind enemy lines to make a dent in an enemy advance, paving a path as a squad, or even tangibly affecting the ground battle as a bomber pilot.

FINDING THE FUN

Achievement in the game is merited based on your participation towards capturing and holding objectives and generally killing enemies. It’s reflected in the sprinkling of Battle Points which you can exchange to redeploy as a special hero character beyond the standard classes of assault, heavy, officer and specialist. This is a progression system contained within each match and works rather well to keep me interested, because it’s the route to

CLASS WAR

Try out these classes in multiplayer



FIRST ORDER JET TROOPER

This Aerial Reinforcement arrived in December 2019.

Their jump is superior to other aerial units and their Jet Slam ability drives them headlong into enemies.



EWOK HUNTER

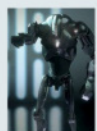
The Ewok Hunter was added in 2020 and shares tracking abilities with the unit which appears in the Ewok Hunt mode. It can also snipe, track footprints, and blow a horn for extra damage at the cost of alerting enemies.



CLONE COMMANDO

These guys are the closest we’ll get to a Republic Commando

remake. Added in 2019, they’ve got a force push ability which helps keep heroes at bay.



B2 SUPER BATTLE DROID

These capable units for the Separatist faction have automatic wrist

blasters, chunky health and a suave silhouette, but make easy targets from a distance.



TOP RIGHT: The heavy in their element.

RIGHT: Jetpacks are under-utilised in games.



dropping in as a lightsaber-wielding hero. They can inflict overwhelming damage on other players, while locking into a duel with your opposing number is always a delight.

It often happens that you make up the Battle Points you need to spawn as Luke Skywalker but he's unavailable, because somebody is already rampaging across the level as them. If you're lucky, they're as green as you are and perish quickly, but otherwise you can be tempted to twiddle your thumbs until they do. Your time as a Jedi, when it comes, is often short-lived. Either it's because you've become public enemy number one, or you've misjudged your jump height and accidentally leapt into a big hole to your death.

The sooner you accept that you are grist for the mill, the more fun there is to be had. The basic heavy is entertaining, partly because they make the most noise by firing their machine gun in 'sentry mode'. You can also roll your Battle Points into one of the cheaper 'Reinforcement' units like jet troopers. Their jetpack lets them traverse levels easily, and gives rise to flanking opportunities where you drop in on a defender from above and finish them with the thump of your melee attack. Their

YOUR TIME AS A JEDI, WHEN IT COMES, IS OFTEN SHORT-LIVED

evasive dodges become jet powered, and being able to flit in and out of danger makes them incredibly versatile. The Clone Commando hints at a more tactical playstyle, utilising an ally-boosting ability, a grenade launcher which knocks out heavy opponents and a Repeating Blaster Rifle to subdue opponents.

Your overall improvement in the game takes shape in the unlock of cards which moderate your active and passive abilities within each character class. It's not worth sticking around for, but it is a means of customising your playstyle.

THE HUNT

A surprising diversion is Ewok Hunt, a post-launch game mode which plays off the asymmetry of Return of the Jedi's climactic battle to great effect. It plays unlike the rest of the game. Ewoks are tasked with picking off a dwindling crew of armed but conspicuous Stormtroopers who have no clear objective but to survive the

night. Those who play as Stormtroopers are forced into first-person view and lack the night vision of their furry opponents, who can track their footprints and easily see their flashlights. As Stormtroopers die, they join the Ewok ranks, making survival increasingly difficult. Its unique set-up gives rise to moments of spontaneous camaraderie between troopers forced back to back, waving wobbling flashlights and firing cautionary lasers into the darkness.

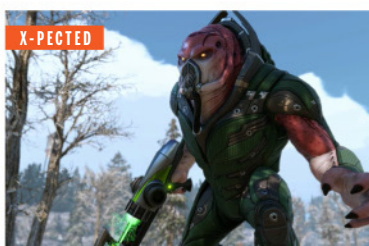
I neglected a replay of the story mode until I'd almost forgotten there was one. It depicts special forces officer Iden Versio's journey from Empire devotee to Rebel agitator and provides some connective tissue between the old trilogy of films and the Disney trilogy. It's a neat, well performed but not particularly memorable tale whose missions tread a little too closely to the multiplayer levels.

The story despatched, another round of Supremacy rolls into another half hour session. *Battlefront II* bottles Star Wars magic capably, and wraps enough of a game around it to ensure that long after I've logged off, this galaxy far, far away will remain locked in endless battle. ■

ROBIN VALENTINE



I love emergent storytelling – when lovely little narratives arise organically out of a game's systems, rather than being deliberately written. Here are some of my favourite games that do it brilliantly.

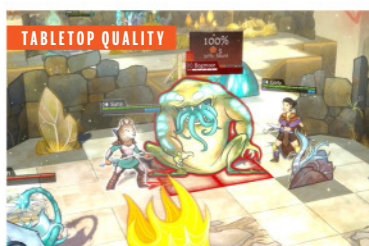


X-PECTED

XCOM 2

xcom.com

→ Ok, if you're reading this magazine, you probably already know how good XCOM 2 is, but I could hardly leave it out of a list of games with great emergent storytelling. Every brutal mission is its own life-or-death drama for the soldiers you grow desperately attached to.



TABLETOP QUALITY

WILDERMYTH

wildermyth.com

→ As you manage adventurers to protect their kingdom, you also get to watch them grow, change and discover their destinies. As they die, they're replaced by their children, creating heroic lineages. Every run is like the best D&D campaign you never got to play.

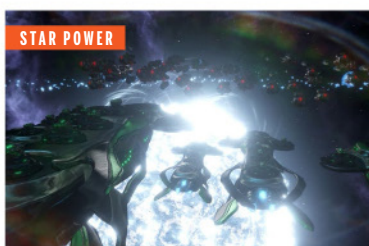


BATTLE ROYAL

CRUSADER KINGS 3

paradoxinteractive.com

→ Under the guise of colouring-in-a-map strategy, CK3 is as layered and immersive a role-playing game as you could hope to find. Playing as a succession of rulers, each uniquely flawed and fascinating, you find yourself drawn ever more into the drama of medieval life.

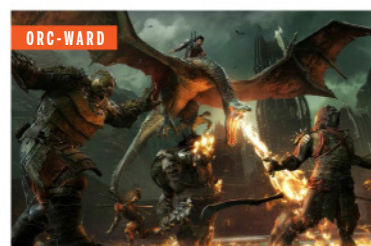


STAR POWER

STELLARIS

paradoxinteractive.com

→ In a galaxy ready to accommodate almost any sci-fi trope you can imagine, customisable alien empires meet, clash and make war. There's a wonderful sense of discovery in *Stellaris* – first, in exploring the map, and then in seeing what place your empire finds in each new run.



ORC-WARD

MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF WAR

shadowofwar.com

→ The Nemesis System remains one of the most impressive engines ever created in games, generating whole populations of unique orc captains for you to have rich relationships with. Admittedly those relationships usually involve death, but they're still remarkably substantial.



SIBLING RIVALRIES

BATTLE BROTHERS

battlebrothersgame.com

→ In this strategy game's bleak, Germanic fantasy world, simply keeping your company of soldiers alive for more than a week is its own rollercoaster. Every petty scrap with bandits is potentially lethal – which makes the rare battles against actual monsters utterly terrifying.



HAVE A BLAST

HELLDIVERS 2

arrowheadgamestudios.com

→ The stories *Helldivers 2* generates are not especially nuanced – they all tend to boil down to 'and then my buddy blew me up accidentally' – but it's almost impossible to play with your friends and not come away with five hilarious new anecdotes. Collaborative slapstick comedy!



GOLD STANDARD

SULTAN'S GAME

shorturl.at/TDY3G

→ A more recent example, roguelike *Sultan's Game* uses a strange system of cards to draw you into playing out a man's descent into debauchery and evil. As you strive to win the Sultan's challenge, you inevitably weave a fresh tale of murder, deceit and obscenity.



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IT'S ALL OVER...



THE PCG INVESTIGATOR

Dick Ray-Tracing is who PC gamers go to for help when no one else will. This month's case: **THE FINAL PWN**

PART 4

"Enough grandstanding, goodbye Ray-Tracing." Housebrick drew his pistol and shot me clean through the abdomen. I hadn't seen it coming, but that was no surprise. It's hard to keep your eye on the ball through the bottom of a bottle of Scotch. "Oh, Ray-Tracing, the right man in the wrong place can make all the difference in the world. But you're the wrong man and you're out of time. You're an independent PC man in a collective console age, and this age belongs to us, the corporate suits who long ago fooled gamers into thinking we had their backs and loved games, when what we really only cared about was gaming industry exploitation and profit."

I saw a hot air balloon land at the end of the tunnel. "Sorry I couldn't stick around Dick," Housebrick said as he turned and boarded the balloon, putting on flight goggles, "but I'm off to celebrate our hollowing out of the videogame industry with the CGC's visionary supreme leader. Toodles!" Housebrick fired up the burner and began to take off. "You can't win this one, Dick," an approaching CGC goon goaded. "No, but I can make damn sure none of you do either," I replied, as blood from the gunshot wound dripped down my shirt.

I threw the bottle of Scotch at the thugs and, as it was midair, hip-fired my revolver. The bullet shattered the bottle, sending glass flying over the group, buying me a precious few seconds. I turned and ran towards the departing balloon. It was four metres off the ground now, but one of the guide ropes that had held it on the ground was dangling loose from the basket, so I leaped and grabbed it. I heard gunshots, but the CGC thugs had missed and now I was sailing through the air above Meiringen.

As the balloon cruised out of town and towards Meiringen's adjacent Reichenbach Falls, I hauled myself into the basket, blood now soaking my shirt. I grabbed Housebrick and span him around, a look of disbelief on his face. "You're supposed to be dead, Ray-Tracing!" "I'm burning the CGC down, Housebrick, and you're next," I replied, shouting over the wind. "I'll see you in Hell!" I cut the supports of the balloon's burner unit causing it to fall and tilt towards Housebrick. I jammed my arm in the control unit and opened all the valves to maximum. "Ray-Traci...!" is the last thing I heard from Housebrick as a cannon of flames burst forth from the burner and enveloped the second CGC leader as well as the multiple balloon suspension lines. And then there was nothing.

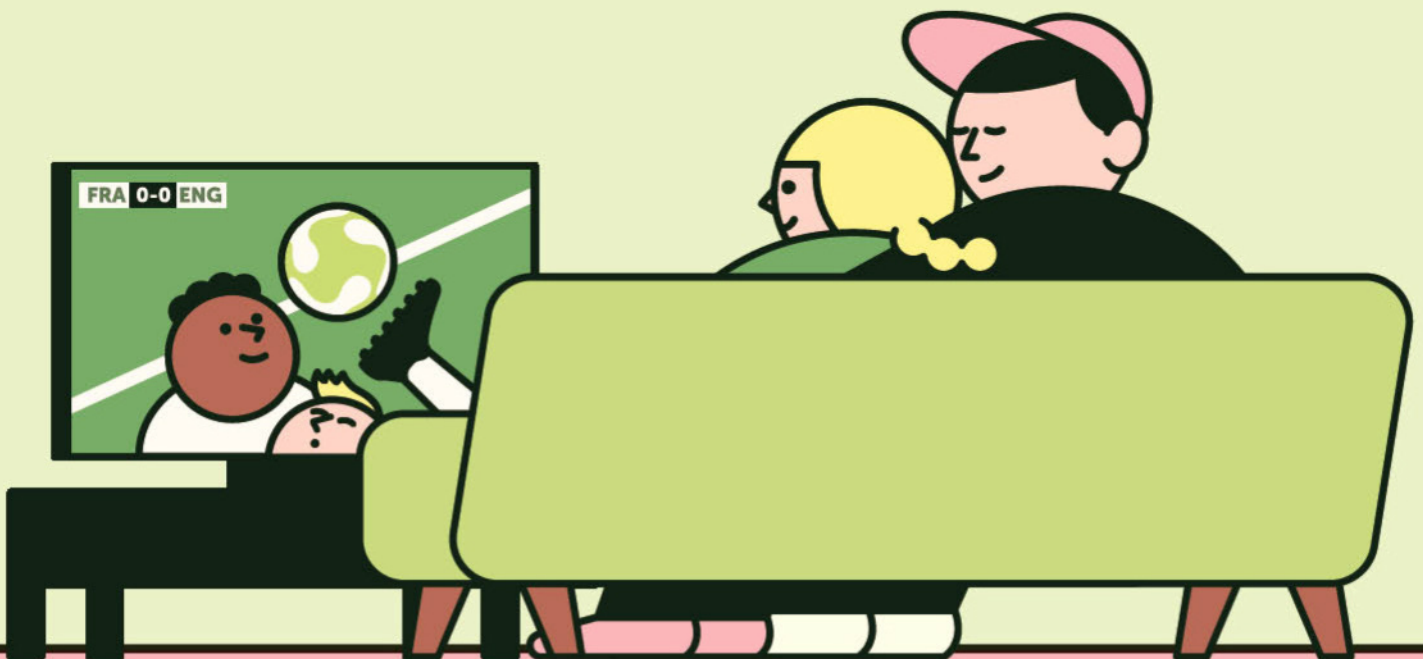
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A trap?
Probably
No. I'm not
playing god
Charles did this last
their composure
Charles. No!
You have to turn back!
Charles.
insane!
Taser!!
There's a
storm coming
I care about the why,
not the who

To slash is to be frantic
I can build narratives
through blood
Who's your suspect?
What if he
gets us?
He who controls the light
controls the dark
I think you'll
be alright
Rural Rural
Contact pattern